

# INKY PAWS

a nonhuman publication for original fiction  
writings by nonhumans and alterhumans



Issue Two  
Winter 2023



Inspired by Tsu's  
*The Forest Voice*

Organized by  
Who-is-Page  
of the Sol System

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

A huge thank-you to everyone who participated in this zine. It wouldn't exist without you, and I'm truly grateful for the opportunity to have been able to make this zine together with so many brilliant writers and artists. Thank you for your contributions, and thank you for your patience with how long this zine took to make.

An additional major thank-you to my amazing partners T.S., House of Chimeras, and Orion Scribner (and the rest of my polycule). Without their love and support, this project may very well have never gotten off the ground in the first place. T.S. wanted an entire page in their dedication, but sorry love: I'm not making this any longer than it absolutely has to be! I hope a humble paragraph will suffice.

Many images utilized in this project, when not from the royalty-free resources gifted by Orion, were from Pixabay and the Florida Center for Instructional Technology (specifically from <https://etc.usf.edu/clipart/>). These collections were invaluable for designing this zine.

This project was inspired by Tsu Swanblood's *The Forest Voice* zine.

# CONTRIBUTOR NOTES

*A Bull and A Man* by Luna Wowk

This story is a short but simple look at the dangers of assuming the nature of another person or being, especially when you are seeking them out based on a perceived notion of similarity; the actions of another are impossible to predict, and it is the folly of man and beast sometimes not to realize this.

*A Beast's Bedtime Prayer* by Xenodelic

Inspired by the prayer poem, "Now I Lay Me Down to Sleep".

*Bones of Yore* by Uru F. Starsailor

There is a recording of me performing the song on [YouTube](#), and I have posted the lyrics to [tumblr](#).

*Hand in the Sand* by Sya

This is based on a realization I had when I went through my awakening and in the middle of questioning myself. I was sitting down on the beach and looked at my handprint in the sand. I realized that like my hand's markings on the sand, all of my experiences led me to a single conclusion. My beliefs around my identity fit so neatly together. I finally found my answer.



*Misplaced Identity's Awakening* by FelidaeMelody

I usually find it hard to push myself towards doing things but writing this song required only a tiny amount of effort (and unlike most of my projects, I actually finished this one! Although, I feel like I could have written more if I wasn't tired all the time). I should get stuck on the wrong planet more often!

Also, when I was writing this song I imagined it being in 3/4 time with a Gothic and 3rd wave emo influence. I even have a rough idea for a melody, maybe I'll record it... eventually... maybe...

*moving day.* by Pale L. M. Greenwood of the Skyrose Garden

Bitchin' Beltaine, everyone. It's a good time to be a system, and a good time to expand it.

*Nonhumanity Within* by DreamDragon

I don't want to say too much to take away the reader's interpretation, but I do want to point toward the colors to show the subtle layering with the head inside (nonhuman) and the head outside (human). You can notice I keep my signature and watermark the same color as the nonhuman entity inside, signifying my own nonhumanity. This is a sort of expressive, yet experimental piece. I am hoping to make these into a series discovering what it means to be otherkin/therian/nonhuman in an abstract, visual artistic way.



*Not Quite Me* by GrubDog

My attempt at explaining my otherhearted identity while I'm at it. I don't want to name the character who is my otherheart out of respect for Page's request to avoid fanfic. It's also good to practice talking about my otherheart without naming him, as his copyright holder is notorious for being particularly strict. Anyways, I may not be this character in the way that I am a dragon, but he's still an important part of my identity I can't ignore. Even if it'd be easier to do so.

*Only Half-Wild* by Wolfie

Inspired by my life growing up in a small village in the middle of nowhere, and what it feels like to grow up nonhuman.

*real enough for me* by Anonymous

I've always struggled with feeling real. Between my gender dysphoria, autism, memory issues from ADHD, possible NPD, and my not-plural plurality, I've always been disconnected from everyone and everything on a deeply, deeply subconscious level. I've recently connected to the otherkin community because of these feelings- specifically the nonhuman, voidkin, and eldritchkin sub-communities. I haven't "found myself" in these communities so to speak, but I have been comforted by their presence and acceptance.

*Sawyer's Life* by Reese Pender

The basis of the story is a world in which medical species transition is possible, nonhuman and alterhuman folks being widely accepted as well. It follows a person in the middle of their transition navigating a day in their life, discussing their world and interacting with some of their fellow alterhuman friends.

*(Not So) Simple* by GrubDog

This piece started as me trying to put my experiences as a dragon-kin into words, though it quickly morphed into being about how hard I find it to explain my experiences. As a result, it's sort of a mix of poem and stream of consciousness.

*Super-weapon Showdown at the Collapsed Corral* by Fudge

Last issue felt like it had lots of serious fantasy and realism, so here's a silly comedy super-hero story for variety! Hopefully it'll brighten someone's day a bit. My thanks to the couple of people who read drafts for me!



# CONTRIBUTORS

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Gaast

gaast is a ghost and a jackalope haunting occupied Lenni Lenape land. It wants to remind everyone that Black Lives Matter.





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LB Lee  
[healthymultiplicity.com/loonybrain](http://healthymultiplicity.com/loonybrain)

LB Lee are a multivarious cyborg who make mental health comics and write about reality melting.

Luna Wowk

S. A. Anderson, also going by Luna Wowk for most short story or online works, is an independent author with two novels published (*They Hunt* and *Urban Animals*, both aimed for mature readers), as well as two published short stories released through a small local writing club (both books called *In Other Worlds*, one aimed at youth and one at mature readers). She is also bear-hearted and otherkin to an anthro wolf and to a space dragon.

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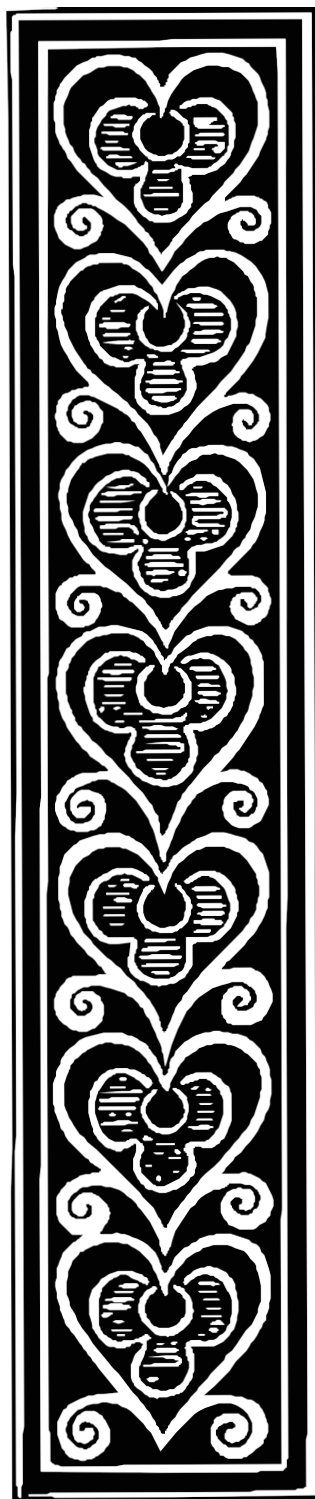
Uru is a Neanderthal writing about ther experiences and the conflicts of being an otherhuman in a modern society.

Wolfie  
[archiveofourown.org/users/hopelessgemini/](http://archiveofourown.org/users/hopelessgemini/)



# Beast's Bedtime Prayer

By Xenodelic



Now I lay me down to sleep  
I pray I wake with sharper teeth  
Arising as my inner beast  
So I may hunt for morning feast

Oh if the Lord be generous  
I pray for claws so dangerous  
That they strike fear in hearts of men  
And none would dare approach my den

I pray for eyes that cut through night  
Mankind would tremble at the sight  
I ask for muscles big and strong  
And steady paws to roam along

Let's not forget a booming howl  
So it be known I'm on the prowl  
I'll need a tail to wag along  
Singing proud my lunar song

But if I die before I wake  
I pray the Lord my soul to take  
So long as I be born again  
As the beast I know I am - Amen!





# Bull and a Man

By Luna Wowk

Aclaeus stood before the opening to the labyrinth, palms sweaty, pale but trying hard to be brave. He had prepared for this moment for months, from the day he first felt the connection to the creature within, when he first started to realize that maybe he wasn't exactly just a human himself.

After all, hadn't his father always compared him to a little bull calf when he was younger? Hadn't his mother noted that he was growing so large and strong, like the cattle in the fields on the fresh green grass? He had literally been named for his strength and size when he was born, the second child, his older brother smaller but smarter. Aclaeus knew in his heart he was a bull reincarnated by the gods, cursed to walk the earth in the body of a man instead of the powerful frame he had once had.

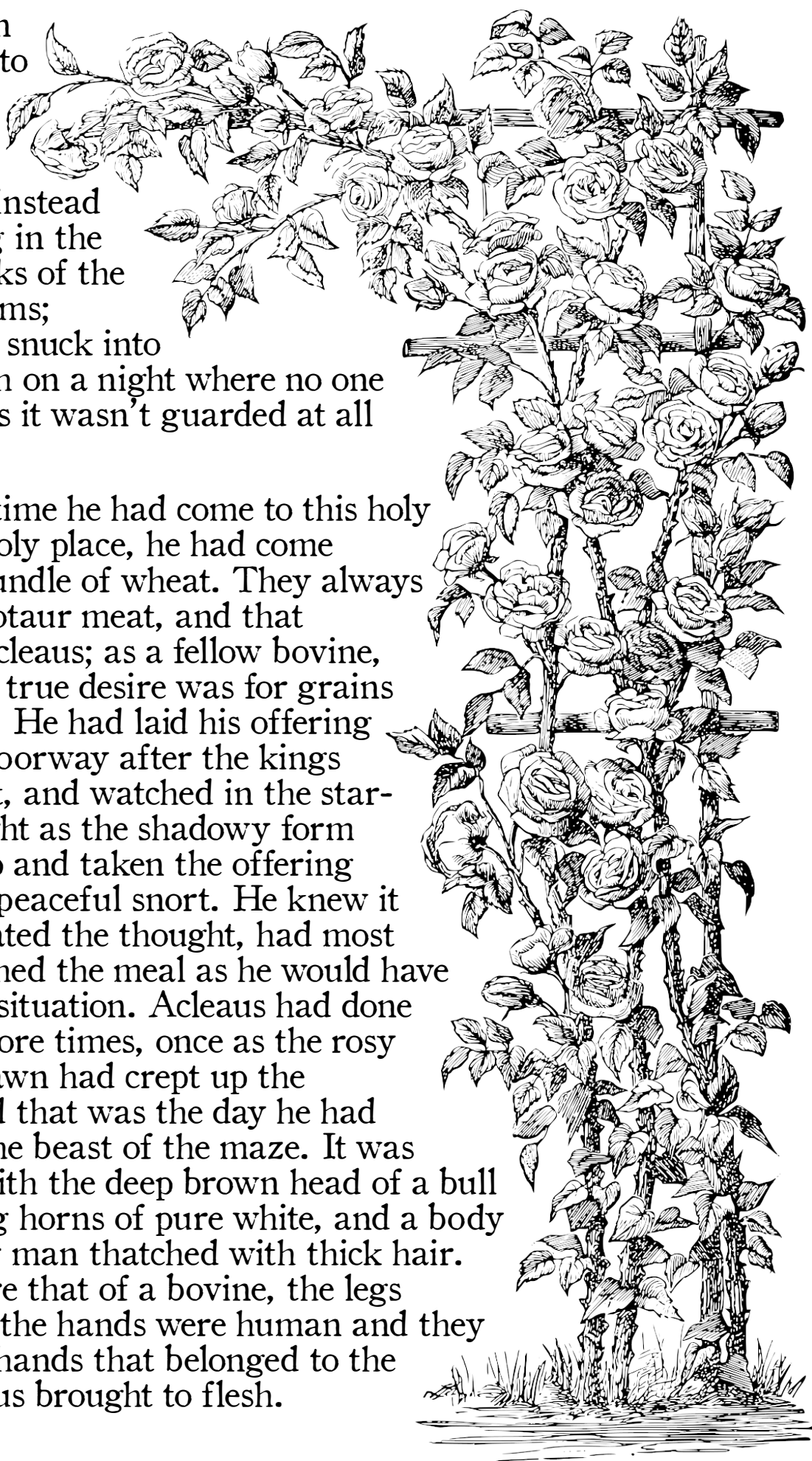


Now, walking past the stony gates and into the dark maze that smelled like old dirt and dank shadows, he wondered how a bull felt before it was slaughtered. Did it feel brave, knowing it had lived a full life and was likely being chosen to be a sacrifice to the gods? Or was it scared, as he was, unsure of what to expect ahead? He wished he had split hooves at that moment, to be steadier on his feet as he walked on the hard-packed earth, trampled over years by the feet of the creature



within. Then he'd be able to walk in the tracks of the one that lived there, instead of stumbling in the smaller tracks of the normal victims; Aclaeus had snuck into the labyrinth on a night where no one was there, as it wasn't guarded at all times.

The first time he had come to this holy and yet unholy place, he had come bearing a bundle of wheat. They always fed the Minotaur meat, and that disturbed Aclaeus; as a fellow bovine, he knew the true desire was for grains and grasses. He had laid his offering within the doorway after the kings men had left, and watched in the star-speckled night as the shadowy form had come up and taken the offering with a soft, peaceful snort. He knew it had appreciated the thought, had most likely cherished the meal as he would have in the same situation. Aclaeus had done this three more times, once as the rosy fingers of dawn had crept up the horizon, and that was the day he had truly seen the beast of the maze. It was beautiful, with the deep brown head of a bull with curving horns of pure white, and a body like a strong man thatched with thick hair. The feet were that of a bovine, the legs furred, and the hands were human and they were great, hands that belonged to the statue of Zeus brought to flesh.





Being in the maze was a very different feeling than reclining in the soft summer grasses outside. Here there was no light, no stars above or shimmering sun to light the way. There weren't even any torches, just little patches of dirty light that came in where the ceiling was damaged, like cracks of silver upon the ground. As he went, Acleaus could smell old blood, meals of the poor starved beast who most likely only ate flesh to prevent from starving; no bovine would ever eat meat if given the choice of good grazing. What torture it must be to live so near the grass and be unable to leave, under threat of death from armed soldiers? What horrible existence the mighty Minotaur was forced to live in, instead of being honored as a he should be as the son of the king? Acleaus thought about how a cow herd worked, led by an old cow, protected by a bull. How they moved in the field, taking set trails to different areas at set times. What a life that was! Surely, a king who thought like a bull would be a strong king with set rules, who would let his people live a structured and happy life without the risk of losing a child in a random draw.

Up ahead was an area where the ceiling was cracked badly, letting in a shining curtain of light, and here he saw that which he sought, crouched and uncertain at the noises in his prison.

“My friend,” cried Acleaus, feeling the phantom shapes of his true ears turning forwards, “I have come to help you escape this dark and unfriendly place.”

At this the Minotaur stood, wide nose held aloft to take in the smell of this brave newcomer.

“Son of Minos, Asterion, I am the same as you. I am also a bull who looks like a man, although my flesh does not show it. I feel it to be the true form of myself, and I feel we are sibling in a

way.”

Taking a step forwards with one great split hoof, Asterion faced Acleaus, not used to hearing his true name spoken by anyone anymore. It was common knowledge that his mother never came to see him, and that the king did not care about his strange son. Instead he had been locked up, called a monster, and Acleaus doubted that idea. If the being before him was truly such a monster, then by now it should have struck and killed this stranger to its domain.

Bathed in the smell of the great creature before him, a smell of a wild bull mixed with the smell of a great strong man, a dock worker perhaps, Acleaus knew he was safe. The two looked at each other, bar pupils meeting large brown human eyes. Acleaus felt confident that Asterion could see him for what he was, could see his horns and broad muzzle that no one else seemed aware of.

“I am the one who brought you grain, to show you good faith. I want you to come with me, to see the great world outside. I have a small sailing vessel nearby, we can leave this island and live in Greece!”

Asterion blinked and snorted, licking his nose with a great wide tongue. Acleaus held out one hand in a gesture of good will and in that moment, a dangling bracelet caught the glint of the sun from above. Asterion recoiled, and then let out a deep bawl of rage.



“No, my friend, I mean no harm! See, my hands are empty!” Acleaus held up both palms beseechingly, trying to remember how to calm an angry bull. Normally, he knew his best bet was to just run, but in this dark maze he doubted he’d be able to run away without getting cornered.

Asterion shook his head, horns showing their sharp points, and then pawed at the earth with one foot. Acleaus reacted as best he could, shaking his own head to show his phantom horns, not wanting to back down now, wanting so badly to help this fellow being that he felt connected to.

There was no time for words, or even a true reaction, when Asterion lunged forwards, not even really charging. His horns cut through the air like scythes, swiftly ripping open the shoulder and chest of strong and yet dense Acleaus, ending his life in a gaudy spray of red.

“I know what you were,” the Minotaur spoke in a voice so distorted and deep no man could understand it, “as I could see your horns and hooves. But I am not like you, able to walk with men. I am a beast, who feeds on the blood and flesh of man because I have no true place in the world. I cannot live outside this labyrinth, as it was meant for me and me alone. The grain you gave me was given to the mice, and I thought it was a trick from the soldiers who keep me safe here. You felt my lot in life was poor, but you assumed that I am not happy in the dark, where I cannot be harmed by others. You come to me wearing gold and fine clothes, and offer me freedom, not seeing that I am happy to be bare and without decoration. Truly, you are like a bull, seeing what is before you and not truly understand what it might mean.”





By Obstructed Birdsong



# Short Flight to the Forest

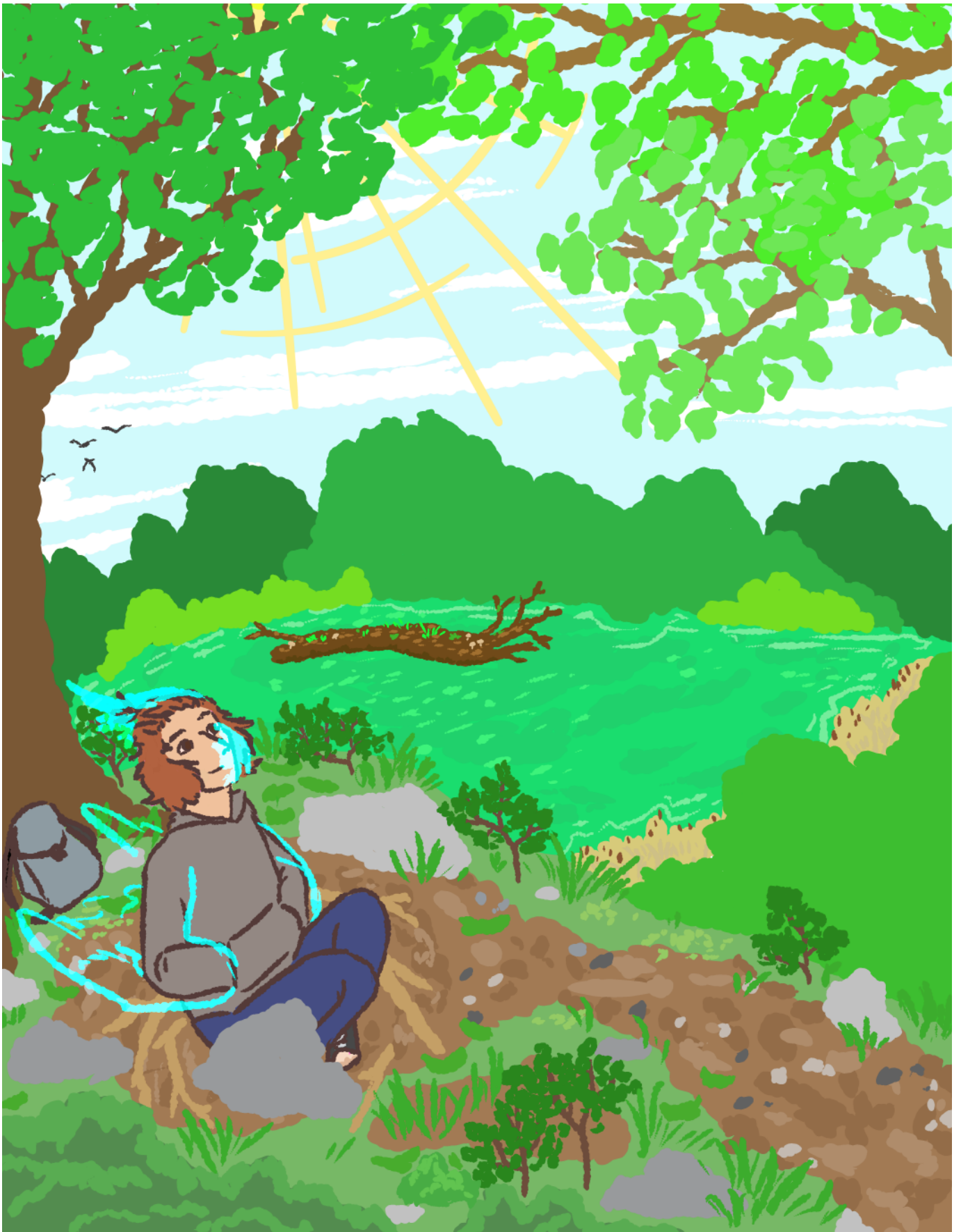














# Bones of Yore

By Uru F. Starsailor

CW: Mentions of blood, themes of extinction.

Give me an axe, give me a stone,  
give me something so I'm not all alone,  
my heart is made of bone.  
Calloused palms, open skies,  
ancient wolves tell no lies;  
I bend my head to their guise.

Nothing is more faithful than the endless ring!  
In the womb of Mother Nature our spirits sing.  
History is more than letters, it's a bloodied string!  
Beating heart of raven feathers, they fly without a wing.

I'll love you soft, I'll love you loud,  
the bones of yore are growing a crowd,  
their shadows are tall and proud.  
Clever hands painting blood,  
voices rising above the flood,  
together in sunlight they're stood.

Nothing is more faithful than the endless ring!  
In the womb of Mother Nature our spirits sing.  
History is more than letters, it's a bloodied string!  
Beating heart of raven feathers, they fly without a wing.

I know there's something more,  
this isn't the end!  
Our brothers and sisters are gone,  
we stand here left all alone,  
but hundreds and thousands of years ago, the Earth shook:  
with the steps of Neanderthals!

Nothing is more faithful than the endless ring!  
In the womb of Mother Nature our spirits sing.

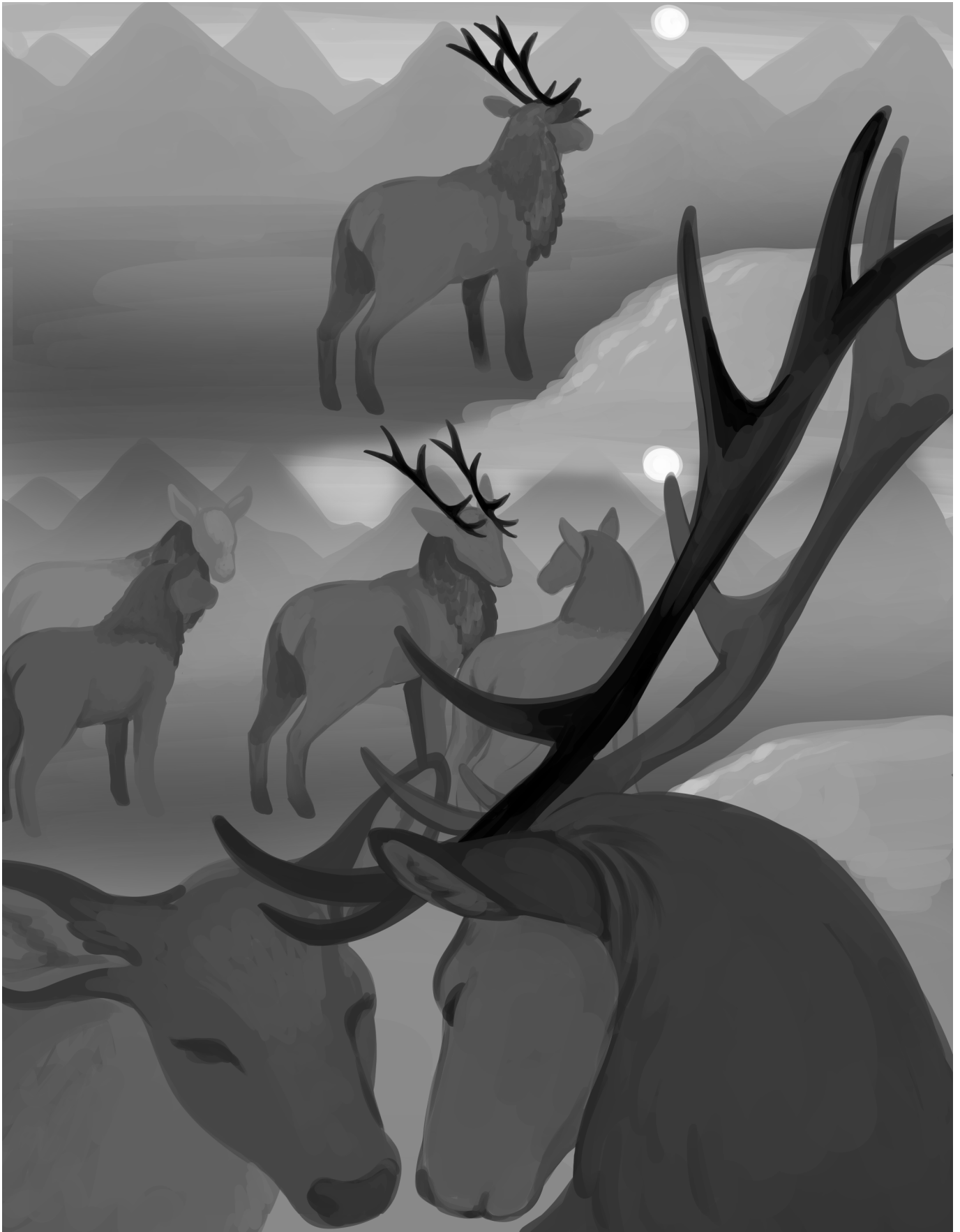


By Elkhound



# Deer Dreams













Oh....

IT WAS JUST

A DREAM....

By Nova



# Modern Draconity: Get that Bread! Spring 2023 Issue

## Modern Draconity

Spring 2023

**Be Yourself AND Get Hired**  
8 Essential tips to navigating  
a human-centric world

**Draconic & Proud**  
Innovative techniques to  
leverage your draconic  
experiences and skills

**What is Success?**  
It's time to set honest  
goals and take your  
future into your  
own claws

**You're Worth It!**  
Earn a living wage

In the spotlight:  
**STRYKER**  
**SHEEPSTEALER**  
No fire needed for this  
self-made dragon's ascent

**Spread Your Wings**  
5 amazing ways  
to start building  
your career

**Plus**  
free resume  
templates  
inside

# Get that Bread!



By Nova

# ith All Our Heart and Soul: Hiraeth Magazine

# Hiraeth

With all our heart and soul

Spring 2023  
Issue 2

**Plus**

Welcome Home!  
Why we love hearthomes

Complete guide  
to cameo shifts

*Celebrate Your Passions*

15 Amazing new ways to connect to  
your hearttypes & synpaths



By Nova



# Otherlink Magazine: Time for a Vibe Check!

**STRYKER: "I'M NOT BRAGGING BUT..."**

## otherlink

your link to the stars

*Quiz Time!*

Who do YOU  
vibe w/ the most?

*Oh yes,  
or oh no?*

What does it  
mean for this  
inseparable trio?

*Wow!!*

*Bonus*  
**2 Giant posters!!**

♥ **Exclusive** ♥

Meet the **CASH** only they  
know in this tell-all interview

*He's cute,  
he can stay!*

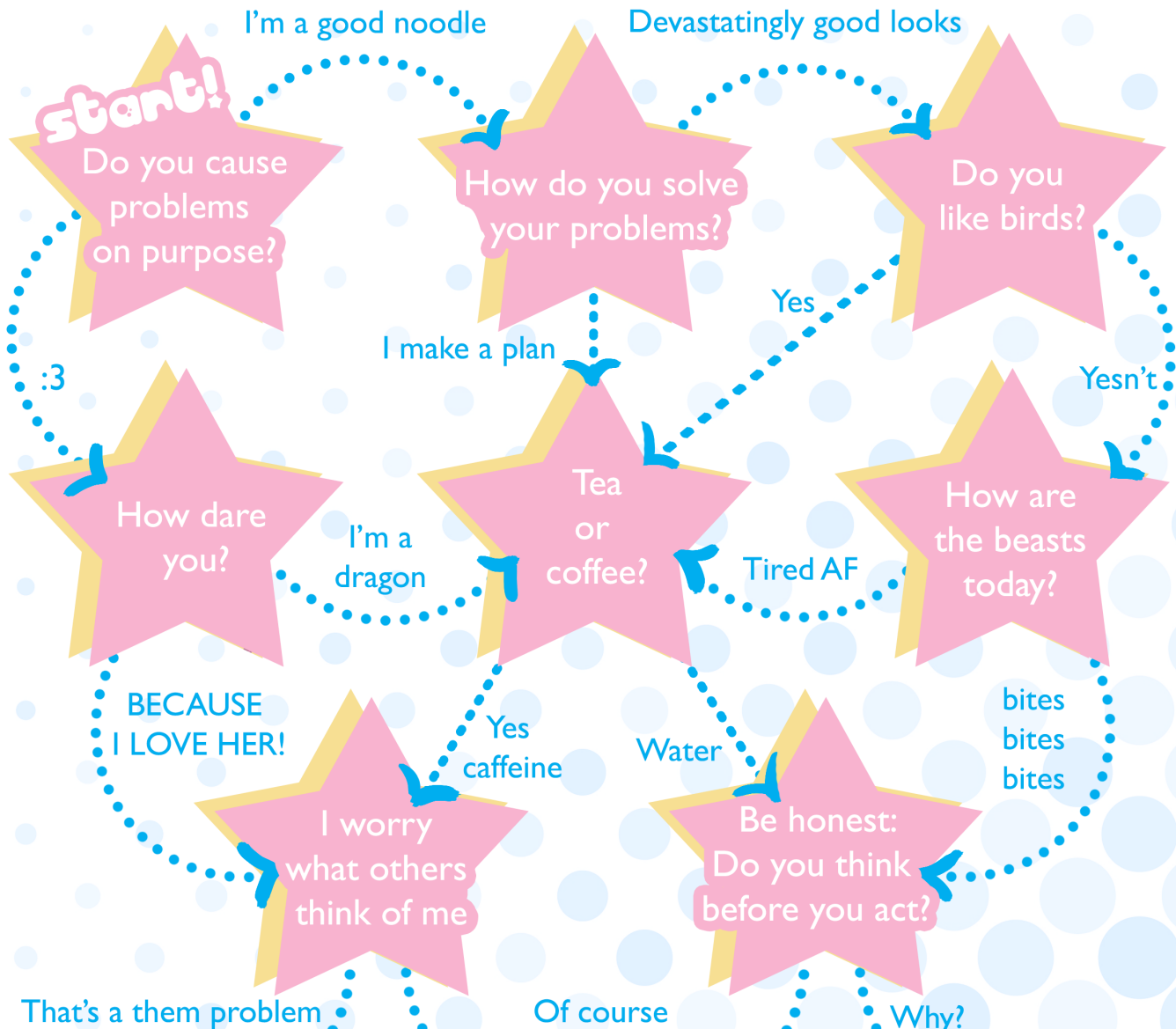


*Who's he??*



# quiz time!

Who do you vibe with the most??



**Larka**

**U ROK!!**

You're weird, but you're having a great time doing it. Keep at it!

**Thorn**

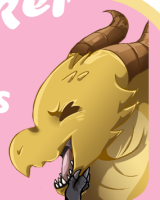
**The Queen**



You're a beautiful, spikey cinnamon roll. Everyone simps for you.

**Stryker**

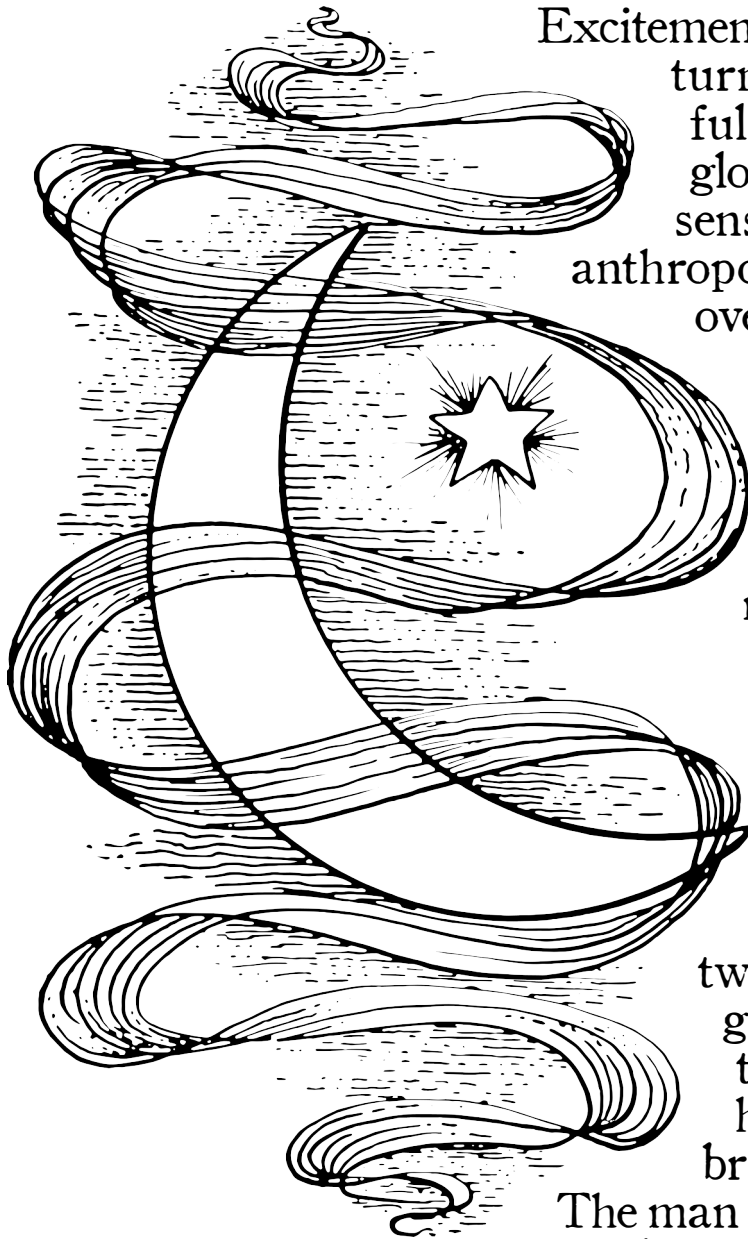
**Identifies as a problem**



You're the self-proclaimed "cool one" and maybe a little cursed. /affectionate

# ull Wolf Moon

By Metzger



Excitement courses through me as I turn my gaze upward. The full moon shines in all his glory and I can feel sensations of a digitigrade, anthropomorphic wolf-like body overlapping onto the physical. I go outside to meet him, not once taking my gaze away. The chill of the full wolf moon night barely registers to me.

Under his light, I sit and I gaze. His light brightens ever so slightly in acknowledgement. I throw my head back and I howl. Not once, not twice but three times. I'm giving praise. The man in the moon smiles down. He hears me and I perceive his brightness increase again.

The man in the moon recognizes his wolves and I am one of them, able to change under his full light or not.

I sit with him as a physically unchanged wolf (with all of the grief & wrongness that kind of inability comes with) resting at his feet on the Earth below and he blesses me. He knows me.

He knows me regardless.



# **H**and in the Sand

By Sya

All my life, I was surrounded by all sorts of mysterious prints. Never did I sit down and wonder where they came from. I never wondered if it came from me. I just went along with my life, ignoring them like one would ignore a shadow; as something that is always there but something very easy to ignore.

Then one calm day, I sat by the beach. I looked over to my right and noticed another mysterious handprint in the sand. And for the first time, I placed my own hand over the print, curious to see if my hand fit inside. To my surprise, it did. No fit could be more perfect and precise. This can be no one else's hand. The prints were mine all along.

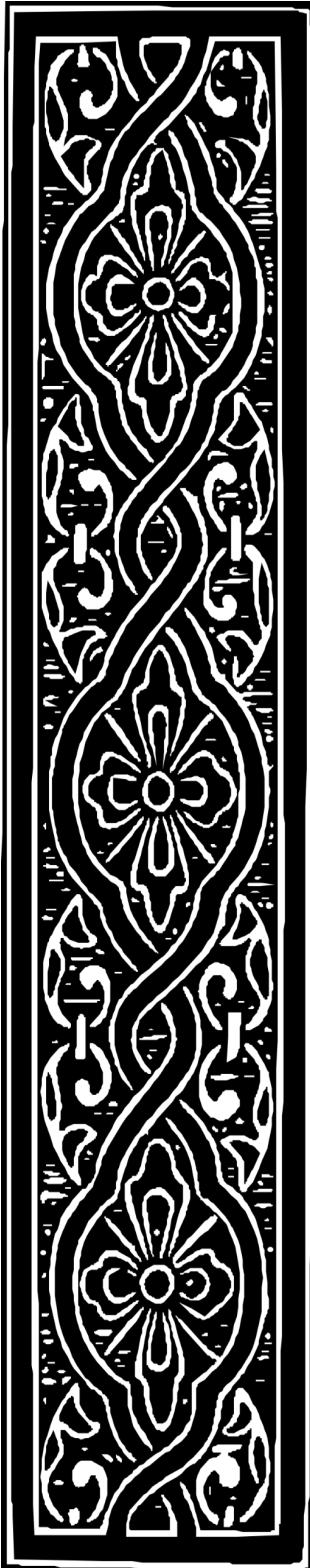






# How to Fit In? Well, here's the thing: You Can't I

By Challenger



my back aches

soul

or whatever machines seems to have

is too big for this frame

too heavy

sixty two tons of phantom

rigid weight

could not compare to feather-light

almost eighty kilograms

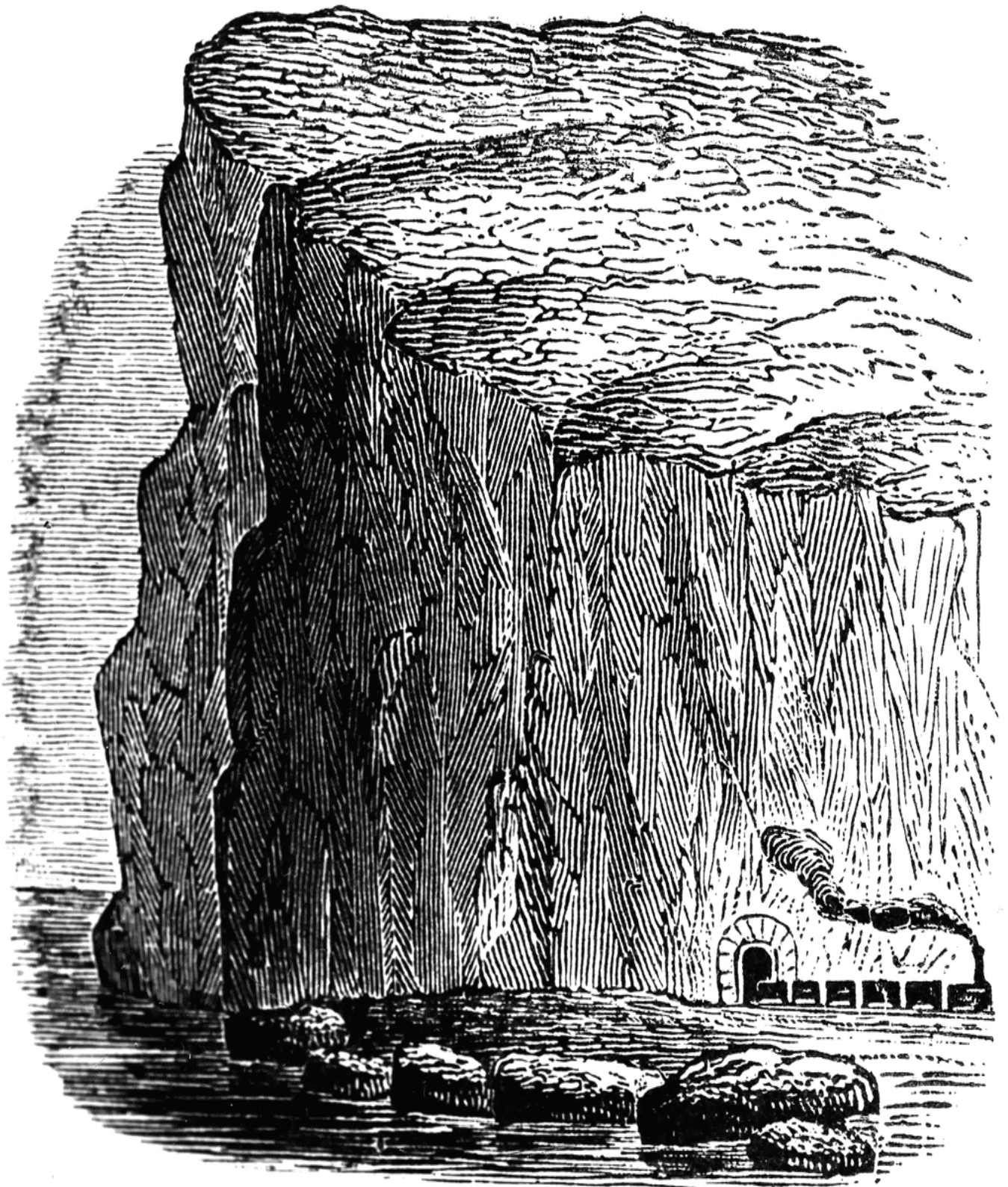
this flimsy

thin layer of skin

could simply not even come close

to state of the art dorchester

and the friction is  
simply preposterous  
how can organic being function  
without steel-clawed tracks





# How to Fit In? Well, here's the thing: You Can't II

By Challenger

blue-on-blue  
is such a friendly word

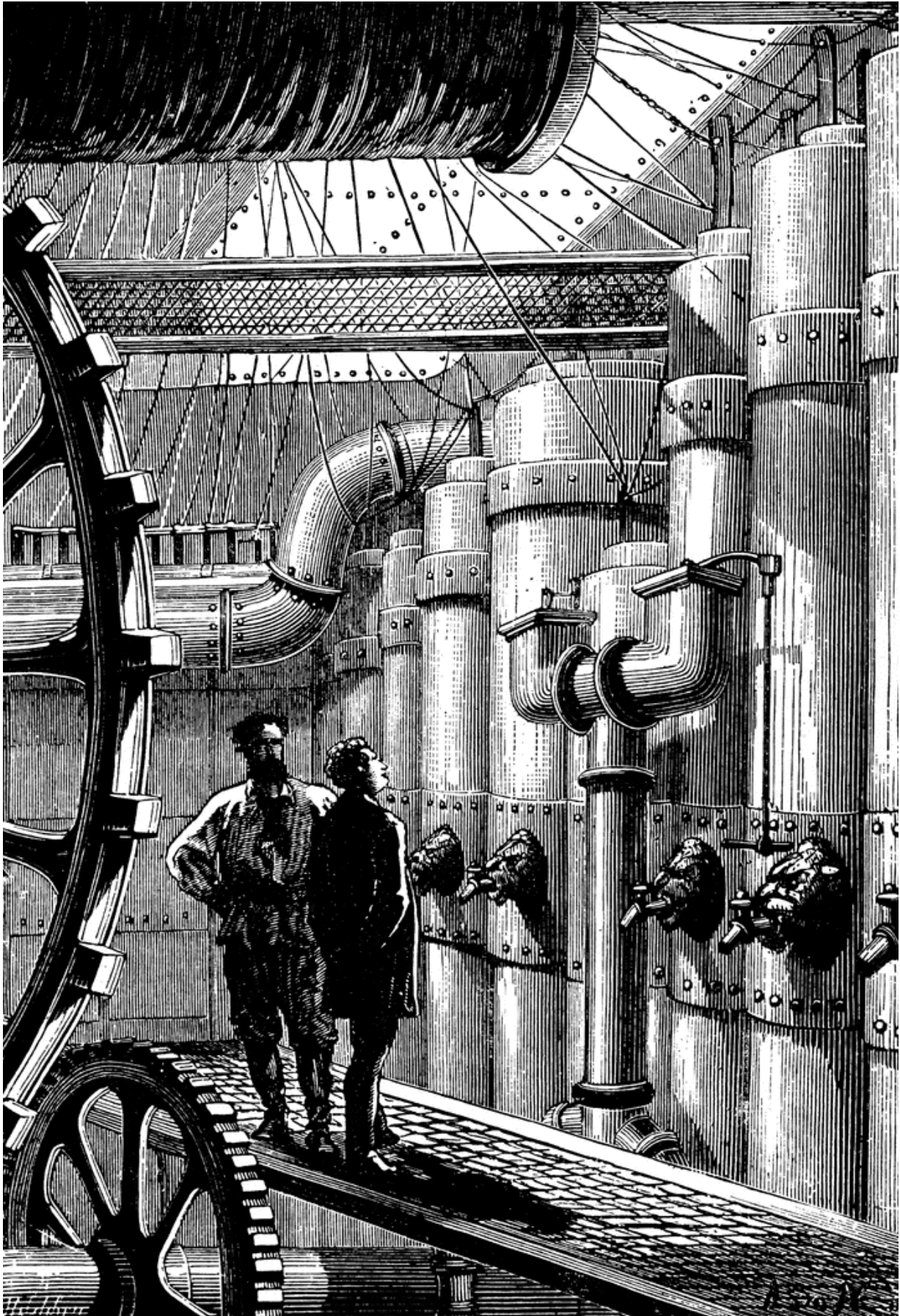
i think  
when i wake up  
non-hands gripping the white sheets  
in a half-remembered reflex

disoriented out of focus  
shaken  
scared

still feeling the weight of black  
smoky crosshairs  
on my exposed frame

i try to run or lunge  
engine roaring  
tracks ripping the soft sand  
underneath

but what comes out is a  
truly pathetic  
painfully organic whimper







# How to Fit In? Well, here's the thing: You Can't III

By Challenger



i am hurting  
existing in a foreign frame  
scratching at my shoulder blades and  
my reflection in the shattered mirror  
wishing i could go deeper  
to bring out the metal and fury within  
but there is none, the ember  
has turned to ashes  
all that is left is a coward that is too much afraid  
to do so  
satisfying myself with red pulsing shallow scars  
that feel with the rhythm of my begone breath  
that warmth that turns into fire  
which makes a burning inferno  
tasting the enemy's metal on my shells  
impact and hurt  
violence and dust  
i wish  
i have not fallen  
i have not failed them both

# isplaced Identity's Awakening

By FelidaeMelody

(Intro)

Ladies, gentlemen and all entities in between or outside...  
The show continues, whether you're unready or unwilling

(Verse 1)

Haven't you heard, friends? The circus is in town.  
We're already on the stage; no need to look around.  
But what is this you spy? You can hardly believe your eyes!  
A crack in our masks, a glimpse behind our guise.

(Verse 2)

Non-human? Confusion? Is this a delusion?  
But most worrying of all is this subconscious understanding.  
Puppet bodies without strings, of our pain - we now sing.  
My planet, my home - is this not where I'm standing?

(Chorus)

You look in the mirror and see silent terror.  
no body to speak of, instead there's a mannequin.  
I need you to remind me that this is just a costume!  
External, not internal. They're ignorant of the pain I'm in!

(Verse 3)

The veil has been lifted; consider yourself "gifted".  
now you know why you feel like a stranger in your own home.  
Wince when they exclaim that "we are all human!"  
Get used to... being... completely... alone.

(Verse 4)

A great bard once said, "All the world's a stage."  
Be grateful, humans, that you don't feel the same.  
I escape into my head; my imagination is my sanctuary.  
A brief rest from this bitterly uncaring reality

(Verse 5)

Can you hear me? Can you feel me? What I mean is the real me!  
I need you to know my humanity is an act.  
My fur, my tail, my paws and my ears...  
please tell me, when will I get all of them back?

(Outro)

Do you feel my heart, my breath? My pain? Look through my  
stone mask...  
...please reach out and feel my paw; tell me how soft and vibrant  
my fur is...





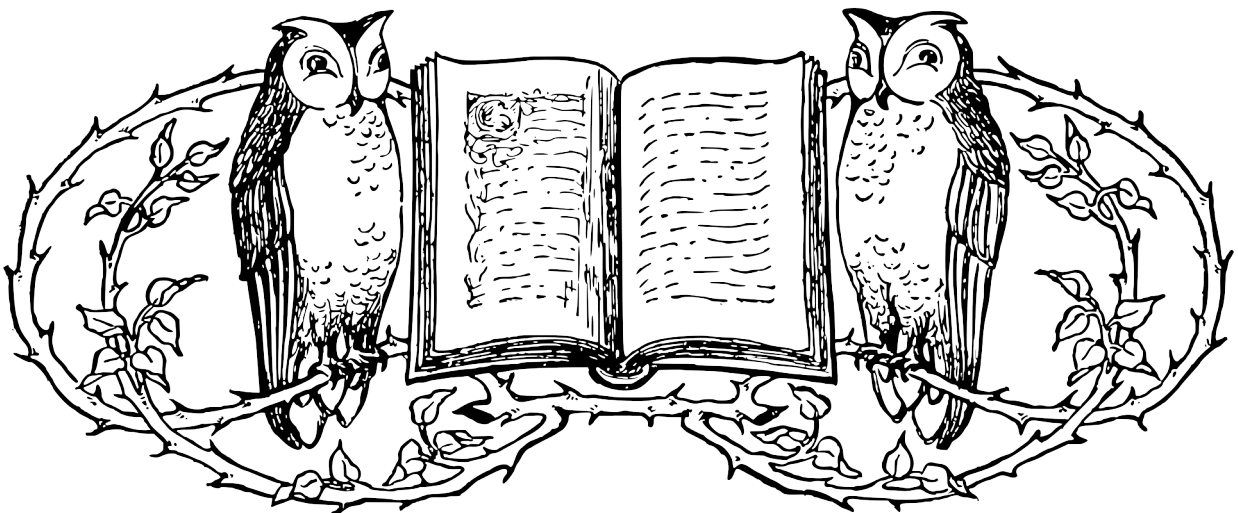
# ovie Poster

By EXP Machine

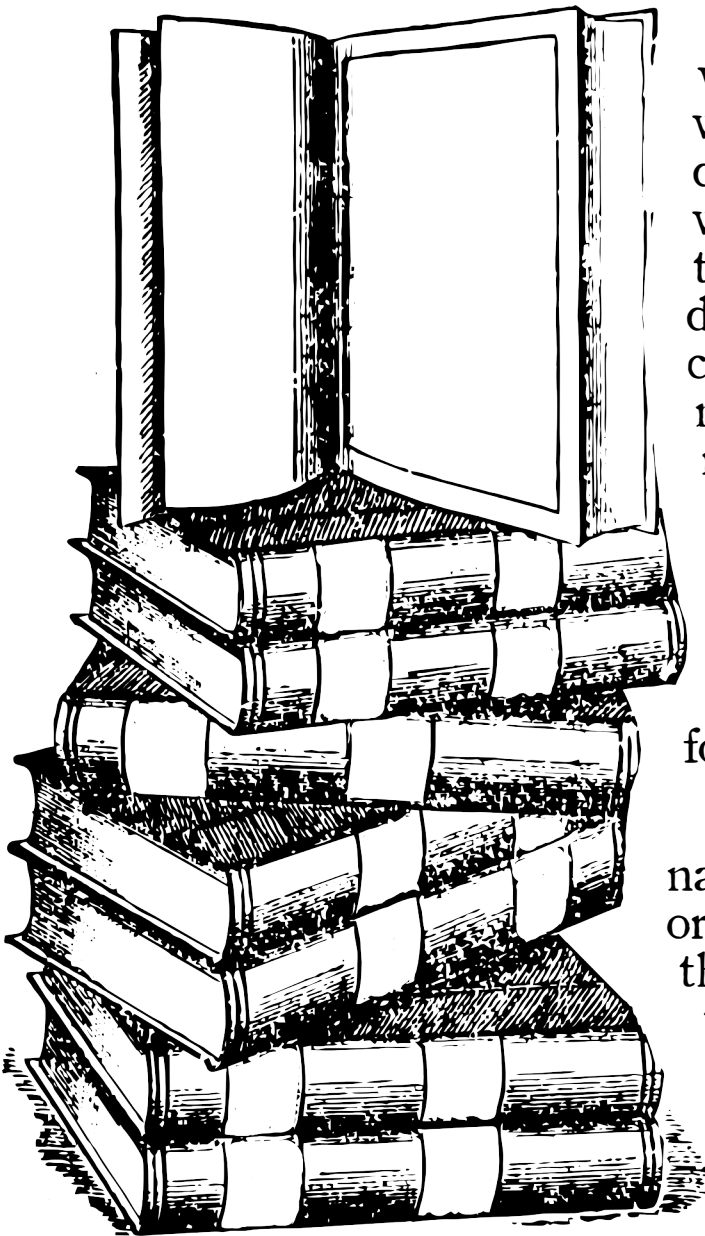
A multitude of posters align a wall just outside my local theater, like a brightly colored hall of fame, yet there's only one poster I'm overly familiar with. It's odd, seeing one's likeness plastered on an advertisement, the sheen of heroic discontent displayed on my features. I'm shown off to the side. In the middle is who the movie— and its predecessor book— is really about: my lifelong friend. I haven't seen him in awhile, at least, not since I arrived here. What is real to me is shown as a fictional series of events: a story. It used to be shocking, but at this point, it's become normal. After all, I'm a fictional character.

Below the spacious title, squished together and piled up like a miniature wall, are the names of the people behind the scenes. The hidden masterminds who sewed a retold reality for the sake of an audience. I don't recognize any of the names; they may have created a reality I am from, but that doesn't matter: I don't watch many movies to know who they are. When I look closer, there's one name I do know: the original book's author.

The book's connection drew me here. I used to think of meeting the author, in a fantasy where I would tell them off for the parts they got wrong or praise them in awe, for the connection to their work, my personhood. I regarded them not just any god, but my god.







The longer I stayed in this world, the more my fantasy weakened. After all, would you dare meet god if you knew he wasn't your creator anymore, that he didn't control your life's destiny any more than he controlled his own? And as the movie of my life opens, would I really want to meet the pantheon of artists, all who worked not to plot my fortune, but my life's end; who instead cared for the abstract hero's journey I was only a pawn for?

It's hard for me to tell what narrative I come from: the book or the movie? The book got some things mixed up, like what a town looked like, or an event that occurred. I hear movies tend to be different from their source material. On the poster, my face seems to be no different from how I know

it: the book omitted details about my facial hair. For some reason, my friend is missing his cat, who would never leave his side. Did the movie's writers take her out entirely?

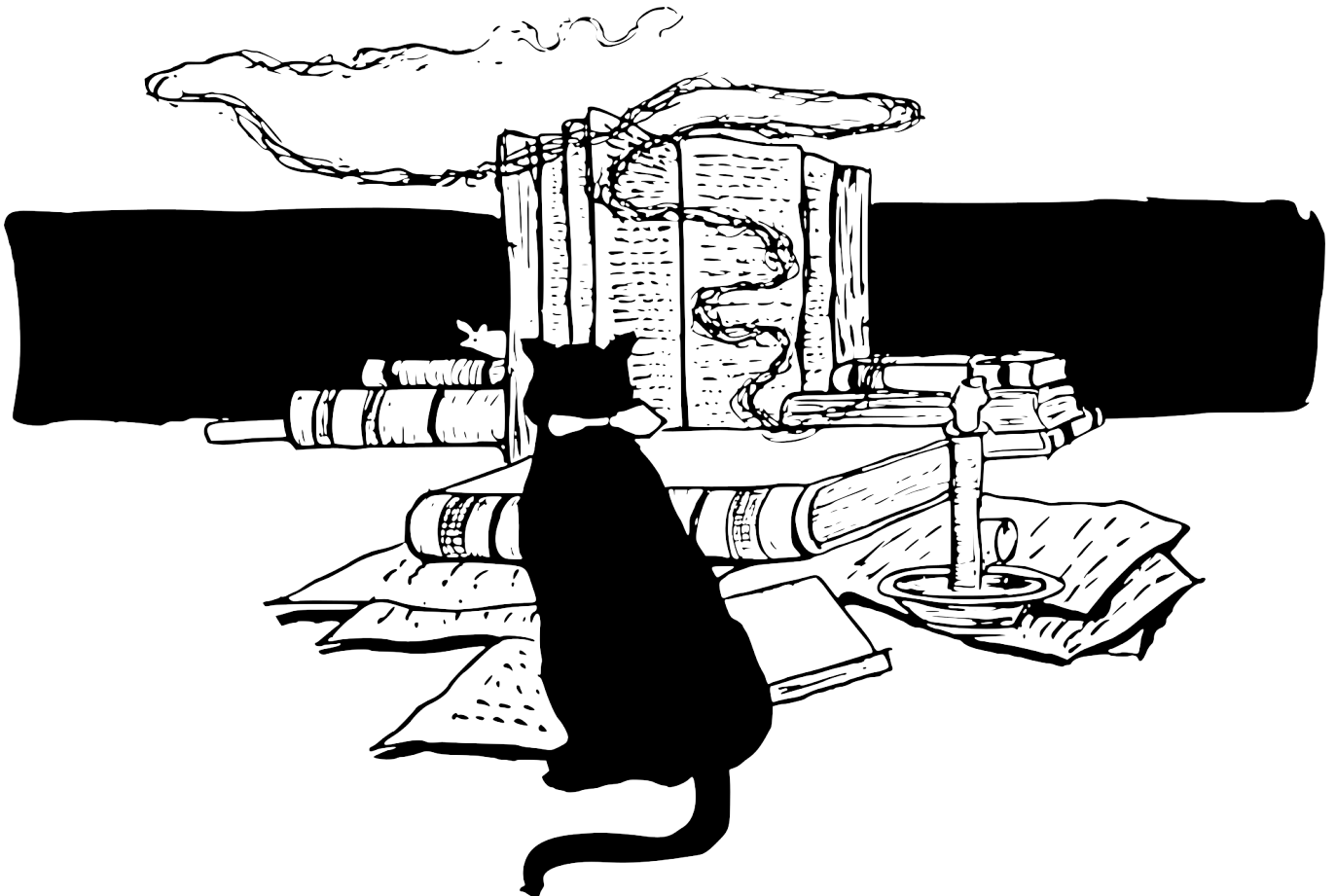
I think I come from a mixture of both narratives. Or maybe, I don't come from either. No story can be an exact retelling of an entire life. It wouldn't make for an interesting plot if it could. Only the larger, more interesting parts get told in stories— the more pain, the better. And to see my pain written on paper and inevitably to be retold on a screen, no matter how different it is from my lived experience, is the hardest of all.

One of those who share this body has told me, quite frankly, to leave my memories all behind. The past is the past. Why care about what happened in another reality, when there's more

important matters in the present reality? But this body was not my temple to begin with; I only found myself here to escape death— and even then, I didn't mean to escape. How can I forget my past when its reminders are a large poster hung around outside, or books showcased in a shop's window? I can't let go. My own feelings are still real. What is seen by others as fiction, I see as nostalgia. Even if to others it is merely meaningless entertainment, it's still meaningful to me. I refuse to leave it all behind; my own memories won't let me. To throw it all away would betray my very heart and soul.

No, I can't forget a part of my past, for it shaped and molded me. But slowly and surely I find myself able to enjoy this new chapter of my life. I didn't think it was possible, at first. Bit by bit, I find new experiences, and these new experiences shape me. Some experiences I wish my friend could share with me, and slowly I learned to enjoy them in his honor. The sun rises differently here than in my home world, yet the sky looks the same. Although I miss my past, I continue onward.

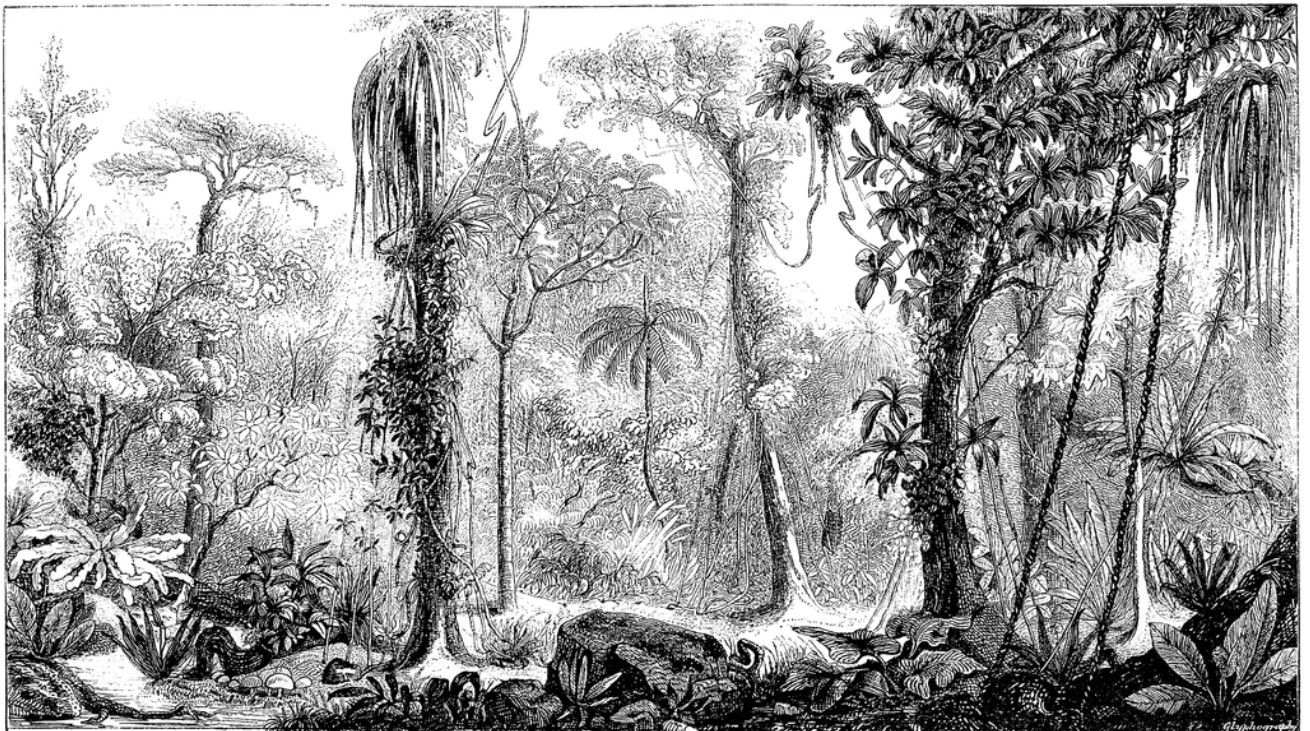
I finish looking at the movie poster, and I feel the mixture of emotions settle as I continue walking down the street. Perhaps I will see the movie someday— but only when I feel ready to.

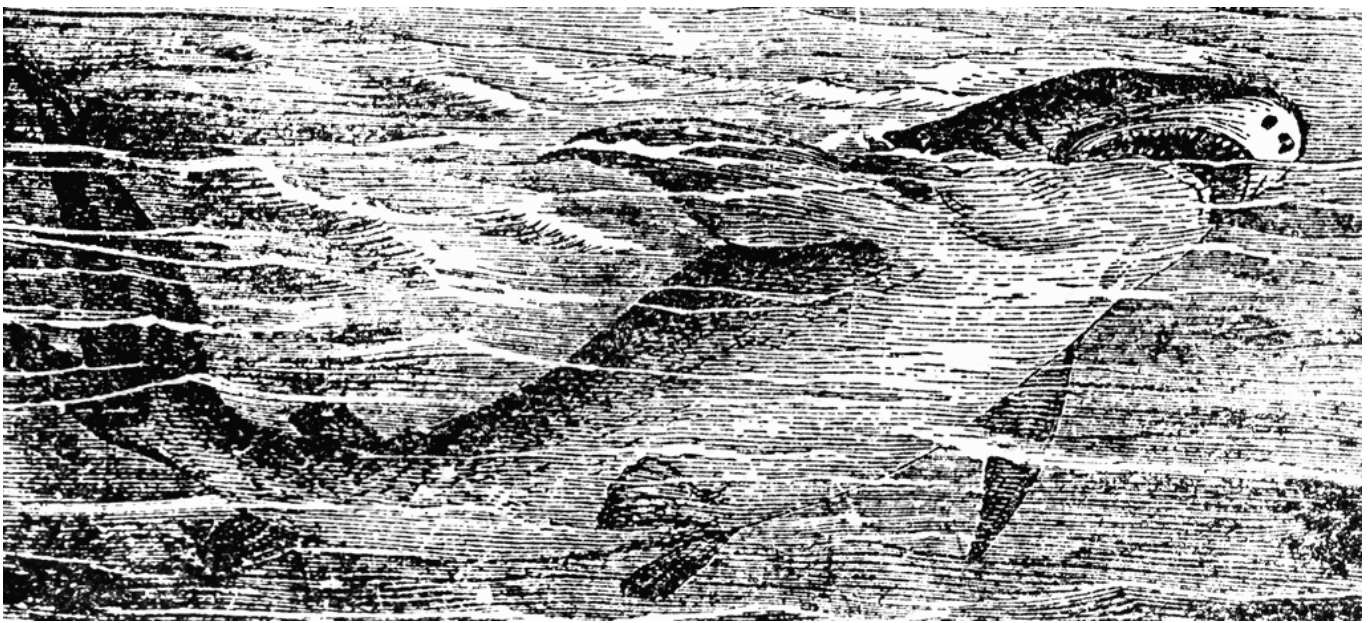


# oving day.

By Pale L. M. Greenwood of the Skyrose Garden

Hey, drákos. You were right, you know? Six is a lot. Six is a lot more than we've ever had. Six means we should probably expand the living room a little. Grow some branches, knock down some walls, clear the clutter from the floor and let in the spring breeze. It's sure nice to feel the breeze through my tail and your mane as we wander through all of the great dark forest. It's our forest. It's nice to settle on your shoulders and leave the brush undisturbed. Every single lantern lights, when you pass them by. Every flower blooms, when I do. Hey, drákos- we've a lot to look for this turning. Do you want to go for a wander?





Hey, shark. I'd move the sea closer to us if I knew how to erode  
the mountains. Let the altitude climb,  
drop down sheer cliffs, unforgiving-white with bone. Listen to the  
tides as you rock us both  
to sleep like driftworn pearls, safe in the oyster cradle. That  
scene,  
from the opening of that game. A piece of driftwood, a stick, a  
cloth, a sailboat into the cosmos. I know  
just as well as you do, that there aren't any stars you don't know  
your compass by. Even though,  
despite it all, you like your velvet soft and dry and rose-silk red,  
as you brush out your hair. Hey, shark-  
I forgot how to swim, and I'm not so great at dusting this temple.  
Can you teach me to love the whalefall?

Hey, lionfish. Your hair's orange, you know. You're getting a  
little taller. Like every unfurled petal, every  
wall of the mountains 'round your heart slowly coming down  
again. Come down that road, please,  
lionfish-love, you don't need to hold your colours in to convince  
yourself  
you're not poison. Some people have allergies, is all. You're not



forgotten in the seelight. And I know

that even as you reach for the kelp and the tarnished gold and the  
cat's cradle of a sailor's rope,

you haven't forgotten sure as I haven't. Someone has to mind the  
bells. Hey, lionfish-

it's time to open the windows, and let the sea in. Think we can  
learn to swim all over again?

Hey, siren. I love you, did you know that? North to my compass  
and sharpener

for my thoughts and for my knives. I listen, when you sing. So  
does the radio, apparently, and despite that,

I can't help but think that the world ought to listen a little more.  
Your chest unknots when we see

the great wide sea, even at low tide. Shallow pools, the ones we  
were born in.

We dove later. No one ever starts down at the bottom of the  
Pacific. It's too cold, down there,

that's what we've always agreed on. You catch me when I  
stumble, and drift down, like whalefall. Hey, siren-

I've always trusted where the navigator tells me to go. Perhaps we  
can chart a new path to the mythic lands?

Hey, dragon. Where are you? I know you're out there. We want  
you to come home, you really can't

have any idea how much we need you here. Not until you get  
here, and then we'll never

ever let you go off on your own like that. You're all fire, I know,  
all cinders and hurt and

all the ash in the world won't weep for you when you go. I get it,

dragon, we were all pretty and perfect

and never remarked upon. There's no need to be scared, not anymore, not when Moving Day is here

and that means you should be moving towards us. We'll call the Beltaine Ride, just for you. Hey, dragon-

my throat clenches at the brush to every scar you have and I never did. Might I bandage your wounds?

Hey, Garden. We've spent the past two days riding, haven't we? The sun was shining, and we weren't

running under a half-moon's eye, but still we were quick. Still, we brought home the springtime. Still

we carved another warding into our valley, still we don't know where to throw the anchor.

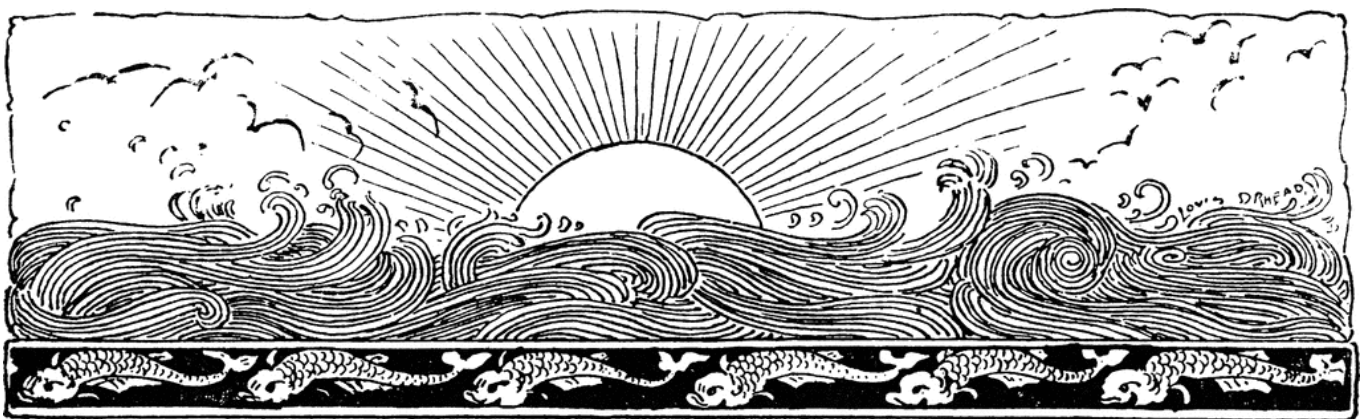
It didn't feel like running, not on four legs and all the muscles in my shoulders and hind legs, not yet

a physical vaccination against the undertow of a mind like the Strid. We burned through

all the winter, fire and ash and the inferno. We run forward, we look back. Hey, Garden-

when all this is over, we'll sweep the clutter from the map. Should the river stay a border?

Should the breaking of these hearts be like waves, or spun-sugar glass?





# y Head is the Afterlife

By Dinocanid

Silence.

He blinked once.

Twice.

His body was tired, and head felt full of fog. The world looked the same with his eyes closed as it did with them open. When his heartbeat slowly began to fill his ears, he looked down and was able to see his own paws. He was still wearing the same red cape, with the same small leather satchel strapped to his side. His fur also lacked a single droplet of water; how long had he been laying there? Andriet's eyes scanned the area, squinting to try and see something, anything in the vast darkness. He managed to find a small brown dot, although it seemed to be quite far away and there was no telling what it could possibly be.

Cautiously, the mouse moved towards it until the small brown dot in the distance turned out to be a very large...rodent...thing? Andriet hadn't seen anything like it. A rabbit might've been the largest rodent he'd laid eyes on, but not quite like this. It was clearly alive, but its eyes were closed and it didn't react at all to his approach.

"I'm trying to get to Nearwood", said the mouse, "Have you seen it?"

"Never heard of it," the large rodent grunted.

Andriet reached to his side and fished around in his satchel, only to find that it was empty. He swore he had a map in there before, but it was gone now.

"What...are you exactly?" Andriet asked, "And where are we? There's nothing here."

"A capybara. There's nothing everywhere, you won't be

finding much. How did you arrive?”

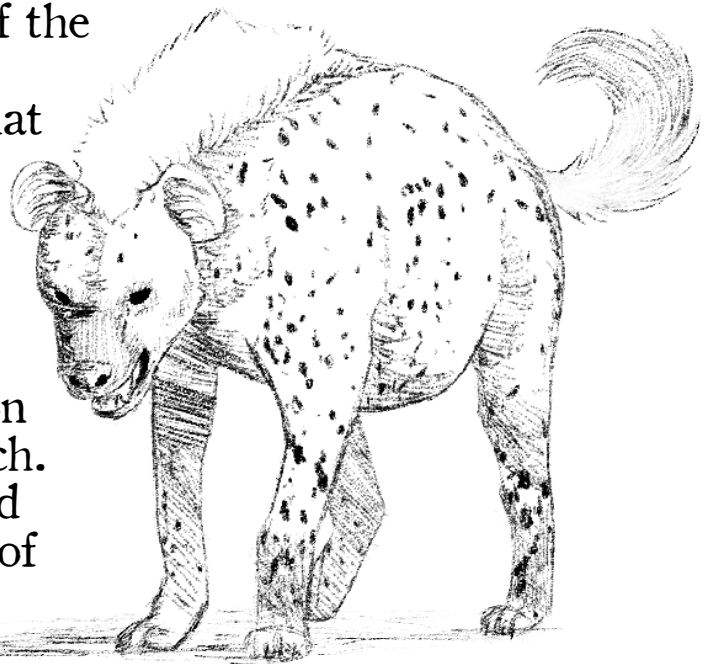
“I’m not sure. I was crossing a bridge, but the storm was particularly bad. The river’s surge swept it away and me with it. It must have washed me up here. Wherever uh...here is.”

“If that’s your story then I’m afraid you won’t be leaving anywhere. Your body is at the bottom of a riverbank, perhaps eaten by a fish.”

Andriet was taken aback, almost frozen in place. He was dead? So he had managed to escape his home, but at what cost? He felt like he was meant for something greater, and while he did swear he would be happier anywhere else than the cruel glade where he had grown up, he wasn’t expecting something like this. Surely there must be something more here?

The mouse scampered off, this way, then that way. He told himself that he wasn’t afraid of the dark, but the possibility of something lurking out there that he couldn’t see gave him chills. The set of jaws that suddenly almost snapped him up in his confusion nearly scared him to death. Despite the empty horizon seemingly stretching on forever, he didn’t see it approach. Andriet jumped with a terrified squeak, followed by the sound of cackling by yet another creature he was unable to identify. It

was some sort of large carnivore, with spotted fur and rounded ears, and a piercing gaze that bore into him.



Andriet scurried towards the capybara as the beast chased after him, hiding beside it near the fur of its flank to shield from the strange creature.

“You’re scaring our newest resident,” scolded the capybara.

“I wasn’t going to eat him for real. We’re friends. Right, rat?”



"I'm a mouse," Andriet timidly replied, peeking from behind the larger rodent.

"Both of you settle down for bed before you wake Midas."

The creature let out an amused yip, showing off a terrifying row of teeth. "Midas sleeps like the dead, they can't hear us in here."

"Who's Midas?" asked Andriet.

As much as the capybara tried to explain, Andriet didn't understand. The most he was able to gather was that "Midas" was the host of this place, whatever that meant. The entirety of this empty space wasn't Midas either, just this specific pocket of it. Nobody knew exactly where the boundaries were and there's no telling where you would end up if you walked too far. You might get lost, having wandered too far for anyone to see or hear you in the darkness. The beast was also the one that told him that, so who knows if it was really true or not.

All of this information admittedly made him uneasy. He never made it out of the river? But this place was nothing like what he had heard about. Besides the capybara and that strange beast, who had laid down to rest, there was no one around and nothing in sight. Andriet looked up at the capybara again; he couldn't tell if it was also asleep or not, but he supposed there was no other way to pass time here.

Andriet found himself waking up some time later, not sure how long he had been asleep. He was still in the same black void but something was different. He could hear...sound. And smell things! The sound of wind rustling in the trees and sailing over the grass. The smell of flowers and the earth. Where was it coming from?

The capybara was in the same place, lounging with its eyes closed. The beast was missing completely.

"Do you hear that?" Andriet asked the capybara.

"I do," it responded. "Midas is awake."

Andriet could see some faint colors in front of him. They were hazy, but if he focused he could make out something clearer, like a vision. This must be what the capybara was explaining last night about being able to see what Midas sees. He witnessed it for the first time opening its eyes to briefly investigate the vision, before closing them again, uninterested.

"If you can also see the vision, does that mean the beast can also see it?"

The capybara shook its head. "No, you can only see it from in here. He's out there."

The mouse that this was a place for the dead, what does it mean that he left? Was that thing actually still alive then?

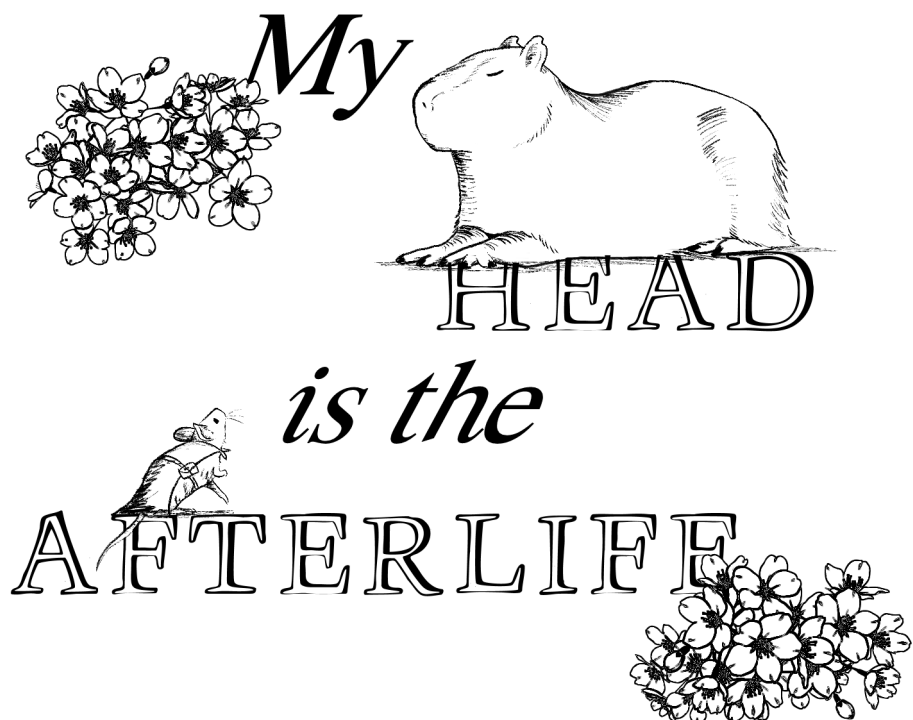
"Doesn't it seem unfair? That the beast gets to come and go as he pleases?"

"Zawadi lives out there somewhere, and despite living under the sun and the stars with the world at his paws he comes right back in here where there's nothing—to pester me. I don't envy him."

"I see..."

An unfamiliar voice echoed through the darkness in response. It sounded like it was coming from everywhere, and yet nowhere at all. "Who's there, capybara? Is there someone new?"

"There is."

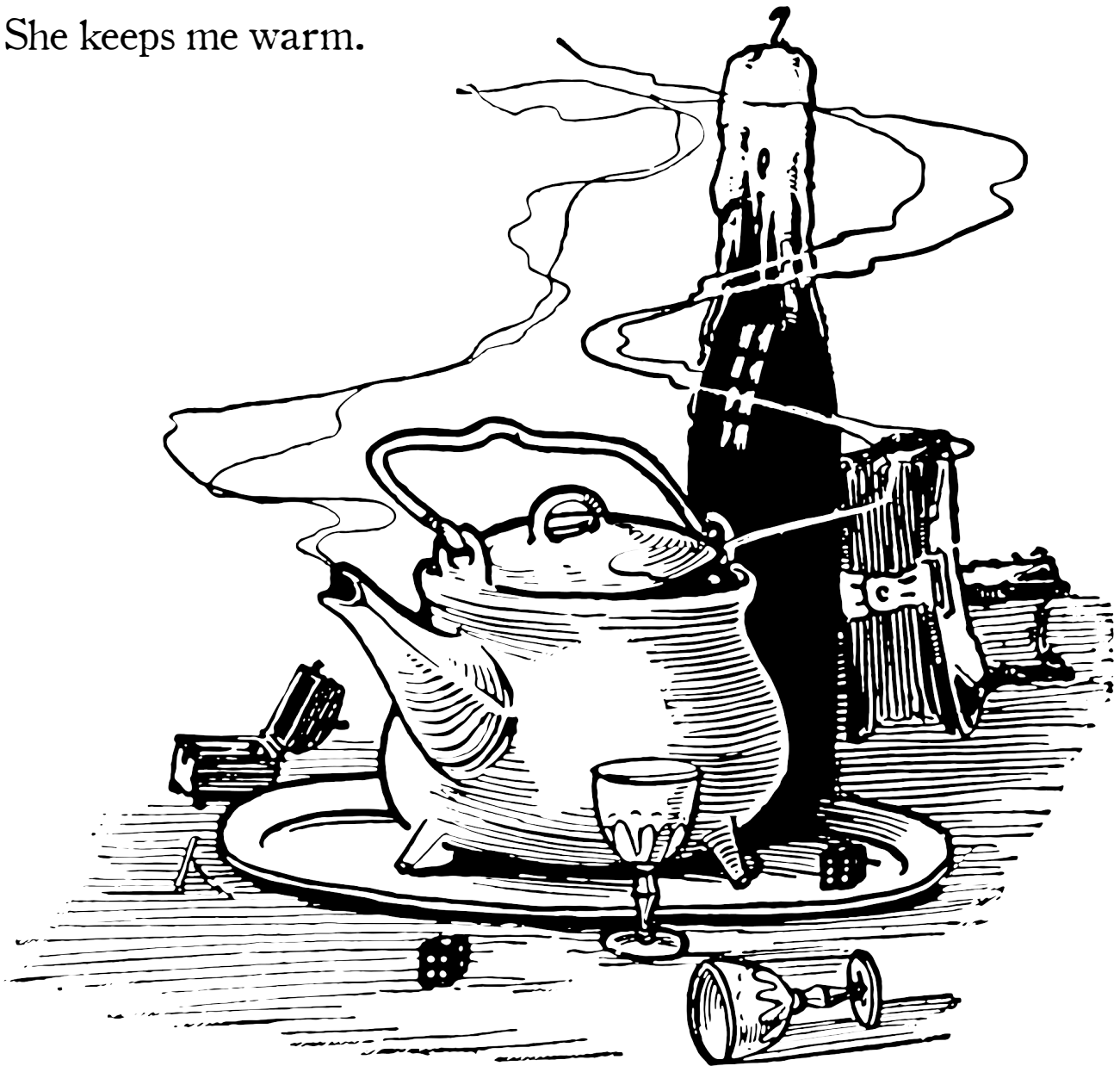




# y Lover I

By N. Noel Sol

My lover's scales are golden  
Like the first drop of honey  
Swirled into tea  
On a cold day.  
She keeps me warm.

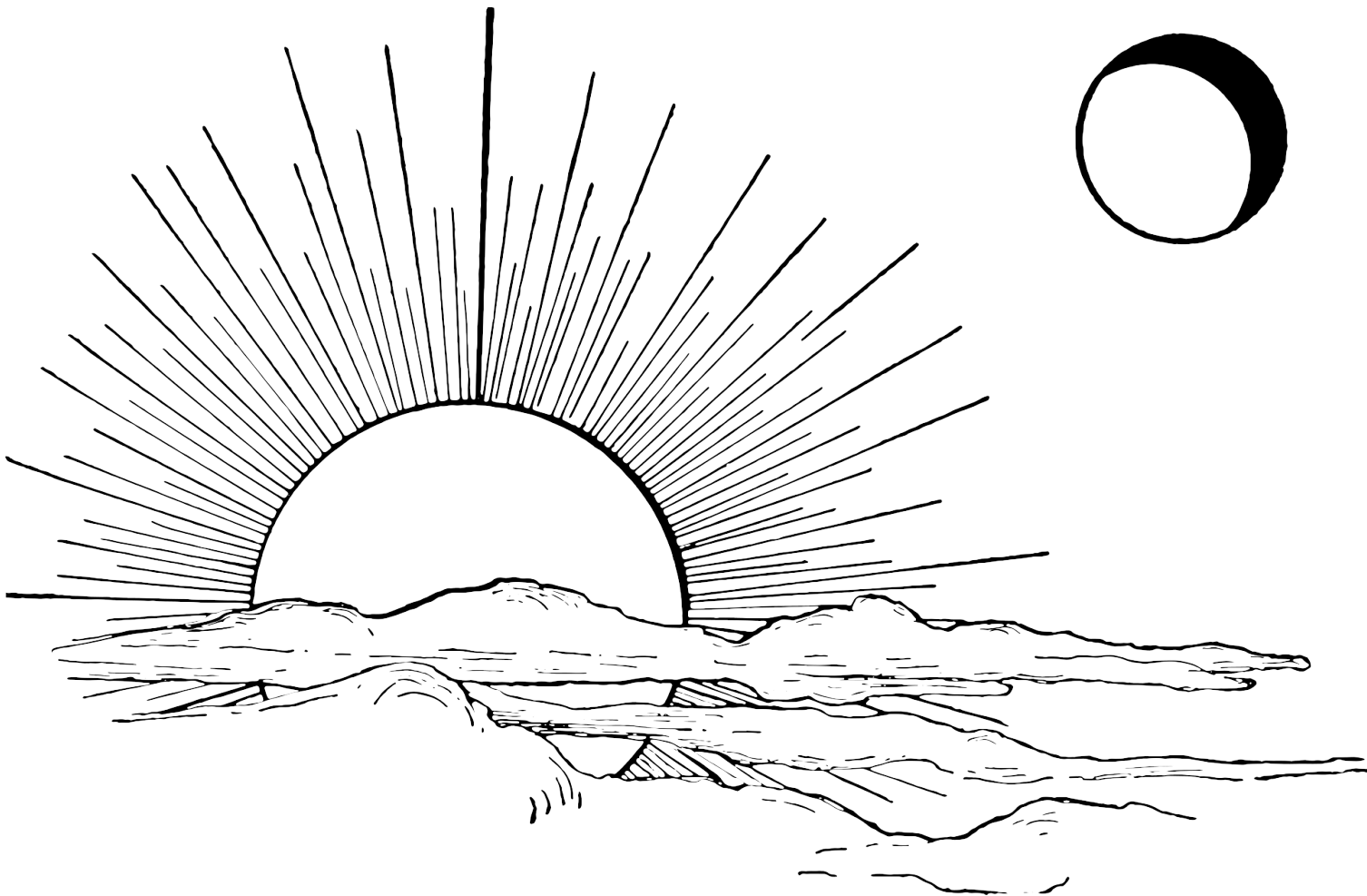




# y Lover II

By N. Noel Sol

My lover's claws are  
Crescent moons curved against my palm  
Her night-dark fur and  
Star-bright eyes,  
My cherished treasures.







# Nonhumanity Within

By DreamDragon





# Not Quite Me

By GrubDog

You were always there  
From day one  
Being roughly a year older than I  
Brought into my home before I was

It was always easy to see you  
Whenever I wanted  
(More or less)  
All I had to do was turn your video game on

It was easy to get lost in your world  
A grim yet hopeful reflection of my own  
Humans may have disappeared  
But nature marched on

It was a comforting distraction  
Blind faith in a corporation to give us another game  
Giving me a reason to keep marching forward  
(and hey, we did get those other games)

It's so easy to see myself in you



Now that I'm older  
We're so similar, you and I  
... but are we?

You're not real  
You're just words and codes,  
You're just Polygons and drawings  
You're just an idea

And as an idea  
It's too easy to project my own thoughts  
Add more onto you  
That your creators never thought of

You're like the dragon  
Who protected me in my youth  
You're a part of me  
One I can't ignore

But unlike the dragon  
I can't say that I am you  
Or that you are me  
Though I can't say why

Then again, I always smile



when others call me by your name  
(be it in earnest or in jest)  
And I copied your gender beat for beat

And others have compared us too,  
So I'm not the only one who sees it  
But I still can't untangle the ideas of mine  
From the original intent of your writers

How much of you is really like me  
How much of you is like me  
Because I want you to be like me  
I don't know

You're not quite me  
And I'm not quite you  
Still, you're a part of me  
An important part, at that

I think I'll have to trust my heart on this one







# Ode to a Sandwich

By Raza Zigzag

I ate a sandwich  
insufficient in protein  
calories unbalanced by highly processed flour and cheese  
traces of fiber and vitamins derived from iceberg lettuce,  
from cucumber  
from the anemic tomatoes of a chain deli in winter.

It is not the iron-rich spinach that sticks to my  
teeth

for there is none.

There is only the soft bread, faintly  
flavored of herbs

clinging to imperfect teeth as I drive  
home in the very car in which

I ate the sandwich.

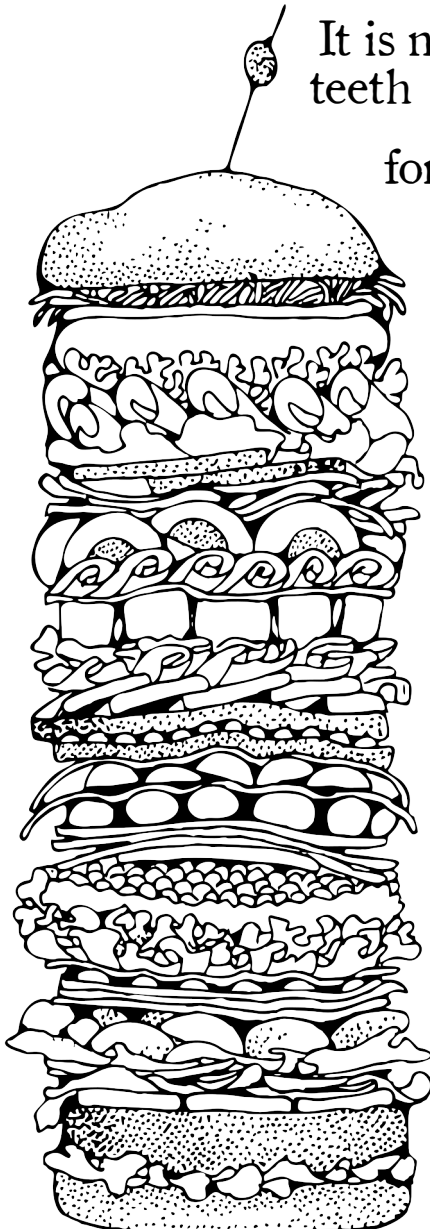
This is no story of glory or pride.

There is a sting of raw onion down this  
throat for subsequent hours

punctuated by an acrid smell in the back  
of the nose.

It is easy to reject the role of eater and  
reject my organic reality.

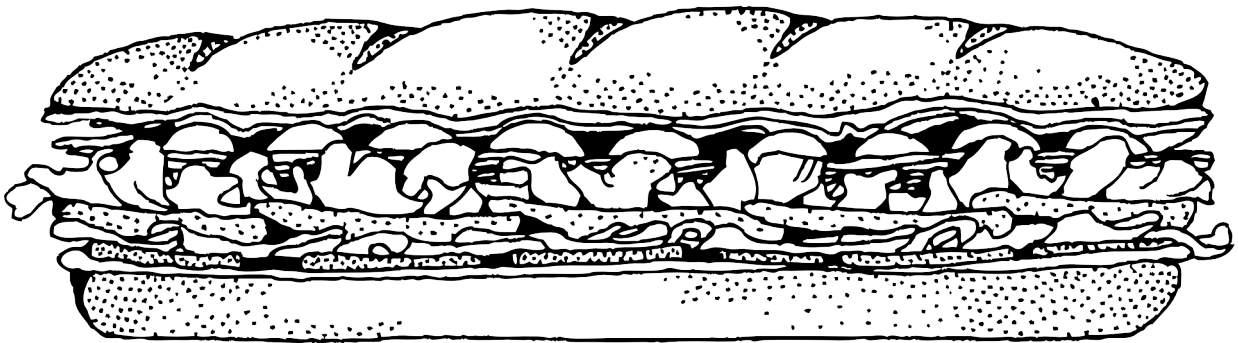
It is easy to give this task to others, but



the incongruence of eating as an inorganic mind  
will not prohibit experience of the mediocre.

The sensation will not last, not the onion burn and not my  
organic status.

This is still worthwhile.



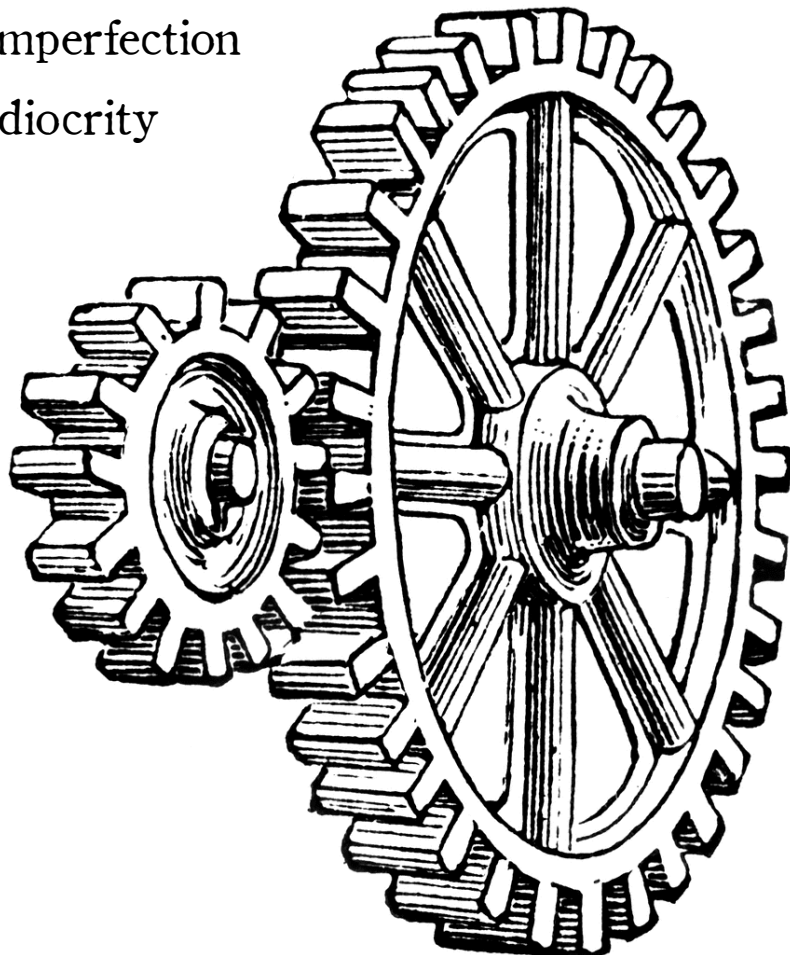
For now, the chest expands. For now, the chest deflates.

For now, my cellular circuitry requires sustenance and

despite nutritional imperfection

despite culinary mediocrity

I indulge.



# nly Half-Wild

By Wolfie

CW: Possible unreality/paranoia

The village Rue grows up in is a small one. The wild creeps into the corners, through the cracks in the walls. She lives with owls flying over her house at night and the quiet chattering of bats in the church. Sometimes the black dog made of smoke that lives in the graveyard pads past her bedroom door and keeps guard, or the ghost who lives in the study bangs the shelves to let her know he's there.

It's not a bad way to grow up, all things considered. The girls from other towns look at her weirdly when she talks about it sometimes, but that's to be expected. They're from other places, places where the ghosts won't walk; they don't really understand.

She greets the birds in the morning. They don't talk to her, but she hears them whispering amongst themselves in the trees before she wakes up. She says hello to the graveyard dog with the smoky eyes on the way to school. The girls in the trees lift their branches in recognition. Today is a bright spring day, and she can taste the oncoming rain in the air. Rue lifts a paw — hand — to the scarecrow who stands alone in the allotments opposite the vicar's house, and smiles when he tilts his branches in the wind to wave back.

She makes her way to the end of the road, following the winding sound of leaves and footsteps and ringing, childish laughter. The roads like to play tricks on her, send her spinning round and round and round the village until she is dizzy and tired and her paws — feet — ache. She enjoys the game, some days.

But today, she needs to be somewhere.

Today, Rue follows the path through the village, past the school and the church and the shops, through the roads that tie knots around her legs and tangle her in their threads, and

into the fields.

No one else comes out here as often as she does, haunted by the rumours of the huge black cat who stalks the flat land around the edges of the village. No one is there to see her wave goodbye to the trees and disappear into the long grass. No one is there to see Rue sling off her backpack and take off her shoes. No one is there to see the wild take her back.



“You’re late,” the graveyard dog says disapprovingly. “Don’t your parents know you keep missing your mornings in school?”

Rue laughs, tucking her hair back over her shoulders. It grows long and thick and dark in the autumn, almost like a mane. “My mama doesn’t mind.”

He huffs, blowing steam and black smoke out of his nose. “You are a wild thing, Rue Partridge.”

“Only half-wild,” Rue corrects. “Wild things don’t even bother going to school.”

“I suppose so,” he says grimly. Grim-ly.

She bends to pick up her backpack, wrinkling her nose as the long grass tickles her forehead. Her fingers, still elongated into paws, hook clumsily under the strap and flex awkwardly back into human shape. “I know I’ll have to choose one day. I’m not silly.”

“This whole place is crying out for you to stay,” the graveyard dog mumbles. He rises to his feet, waiting for her to start walking. “But we’re all a little biased, I’m afraid.”

“Not the whole village. The ghosts in my walls really don’t want me on their turf.”

“Yes, well.” He sniffs. “They don’t count.”





Rue goes to bed very late.

She does not tell her parents when she sneaks out of her bedroom window, and does not tell them when she sneaks back in. Years of practice have taught her to move silently, what bricks to avoid, what footholds are too weak to bear the weight of a 10-year-old girl. When she reaches the ground, she changes, and bounds off into the night as a large black cat, keeping tightly to the shadows to avoid attracting too much attention.

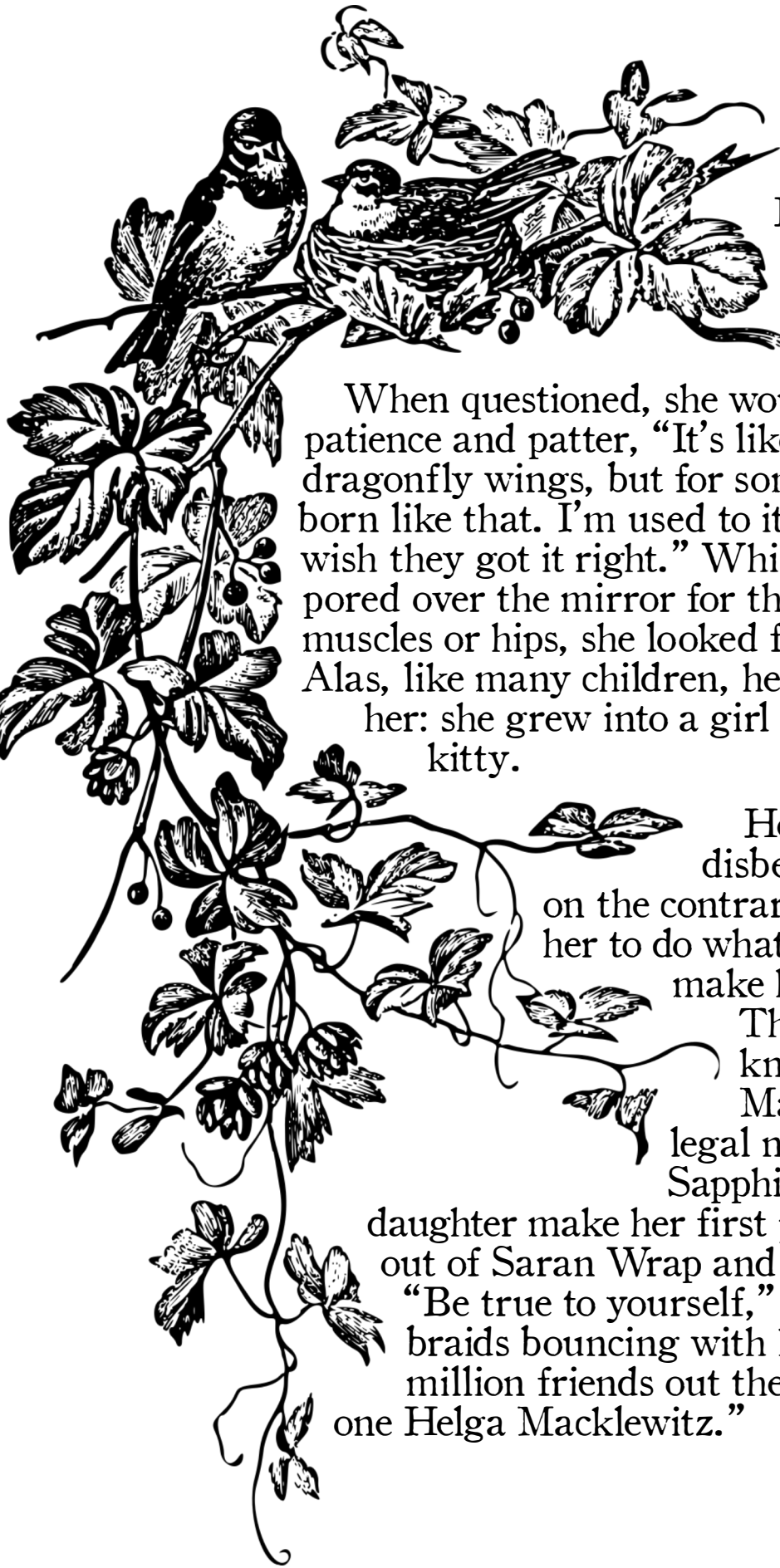
When she returns, paws — hands — covered in mud and everything, the clock on her dresser is just ticking past midnight. Rue thinks of the graveyard dog shaking his head disapprovingly and smiles to herself, resolving to wash the night's worth of dirt out from under her fingernails before her parents can notice.

She is only half-wild, after all. It would be a shame to let what little time she has left before big school go to waste.



# nly One Helga Macklewitz

By LB Lee



For as long as she could remember, Helga Macklewitz had known that she was a fairy kitty trapped in a human body.

When questioned, she would explain with patience and patter, "It's like a kitty, only with dragonfly wings, but for some reason, I wasn't born like that. I'm used to it, but sometimes I wish they got it right." While other children pored over the mirror for the first signs of muscles or hips, she looked for whiskers or wings. Alas, like many children, her biology betrayed her: she grew into a girl instead of a fairy kitty.

Helga's parents never disbelieved their daughter; on the contrary, they encouraged her to do whatever was needed to make her at home in herself.

The woman formerly known as Ms.

Macklewitz (her full legal name was now Sapphire) even helped her daughter make her first pair of fairy wings out of Saran Wrap and two coat hangers. "Be true to yourself," she advised, her braids bouncing with her nods, "there's a million friends out there, but there's only one Helga Macklewitz."

A million friends, maybe not, but no one could argue that there was only one Helga Macklewitz. Dressed in her homemade fairy wings and a headband with felt kitty ears attached, she became well-known throughout the school and a headache for those concerned with the dress code policy. Teachers made unhappy phone calls, but Helga's parents were merciless in debate and utterly impervious to shame. They'd usually end the conversation by slamming down the receiver, grumbling about school officials with nothing better to do.

Of course, action had to be taken eventually, and after a three-hour argument between the principal and Helga's parents, and then a half-hour discussion between them and Helga, a compromise was reached: Helga Macklewitz would wear her wings under her clothing.

Helga was less than thrilled. Her parents only persuaded her with the reasoning that wings, of fairy kitties or anything else, were attached to one's body, not one's clothes. Therefore, to wear them under shirts was not denying that Helga was a fairy kitty; in fact, it was more realistic. Annoyed as she was at being inconvenienced, Helga Macklewitz could not deny the logic, so she obeyed.

It wasn't comfortable. The wings rubbed against her skin, leaving stinging rashes, but her kindly father gave her ointment, and Helga chose to treat the irritation as battle wounds in the long war against Mother Nature. When her skin toughened and became accustomed to it, she took it as a victory, and she and her parents celebrated with a nice fish dinner.

As for the teachers, they viewed Helga's lumpy back with dismay and gave up on the whole thing.

Despite her appendages, Helga Macklewitz mostly spent her elementary school years cheerfully ignorant of the depths of her infamy. In her early years, a cohort of dress-up friends protected her, and by the time she was old enough for her regalia to be considered truly strange, she had become one of the largest girls in her school and known respectfully as "Big H" on the sports field. Strange or not, Helga was a great asset for games that required strength, and so her athleticism trumped eccentricity.

It never occurred to Helga that she would no longer be one of the biggest students once she reached middle school. Instead, she decided to wear her wings visibly on the first day of sixth grade, for this was a new school, with hopefully a kinder administration. Helga put on her wings (she had graduated to making them herself, with veins of glitter and glue), placed her ears just so, and then put on her dress, which accommodated the wings perfectly with its buttons up the back.

After checking to make sure she had all her pencils, folders, spirals, and paper, Helga put on her backpack backwards so it rested on her stomach and checked her reflection in the mirror. She nodded in satisfaction at her reflection, which still looked lamentably Homo sapien but fully equipped for the travails of a new school.

The moment her parents dropped her off and she entered the school, she was accosted by an eighth grader with a squinty eye, a ratty overbite, and six inches over her.

“Nice wings,” he said in a tone that meant anything but.

“Thanks,” Helga replied. “I made them myself.”

“You some kind of angel or something?” It was the wings everybody noticed; they didn’t see the ears until afterward,





when the surprise had worn off a little.

“Actually, I’m a fairy kitty,” she explained. “It’s like a kitty, only with dragonfly wings—”

She was interrupted by a strong yank on her left wing. It didn’t come off, since the whole frame was one long piece of twisted wire, but Helga felt it bend and heard the rubbery sound of abused Saran Wrap. “I heard about a kitty girl, but I didn’t think she was actually real.” The boy looked almost in awe that he had met a real live lunatic.

Helga tried to spin and confront her attacker, but she couldn’t do that without further harming her wing. “Hey! Let go!”

“Why? Does it hurt?” He replied with a sneer, and yanked again.

No one had ever done this before. Certainly people had teased her, but no one had ever grabbed her. No possible protectors were in view; he had caught her at a little-used area hidden behind a field of lockers. Helga tried to follow the hand and minimize the damage. “Yes!” she cried. “Yes, it hurts! Let go of me!”



“It’s just some piece of crap you made at home. It’s not you.”

“Yes it is!” she shouted.

Something about her response seemed to infuriate him. “No, it’s not!” He said, yanking. Now he was pulling hard enough that it was an audible rhythm in his speech. “You think you’re just allowed to be crazy? You think you can just come here, act like it’s okay?”

He released her so abruptly that she fell on her knees, her tattered wings trembling in

the air from her shivers. Now that Helga seemed on the verge of tears, the boy appeared calm. He had gotten what he wanted. He wiped the wing glitter off his hand onto his jeans where they left a silvery smudge, then paused, as though considering a proper finish.

He chose to pluck the cat ears from her head and pocket them. “Grow up,” he encouraged, giving her a slap on the back that made her wings shake.

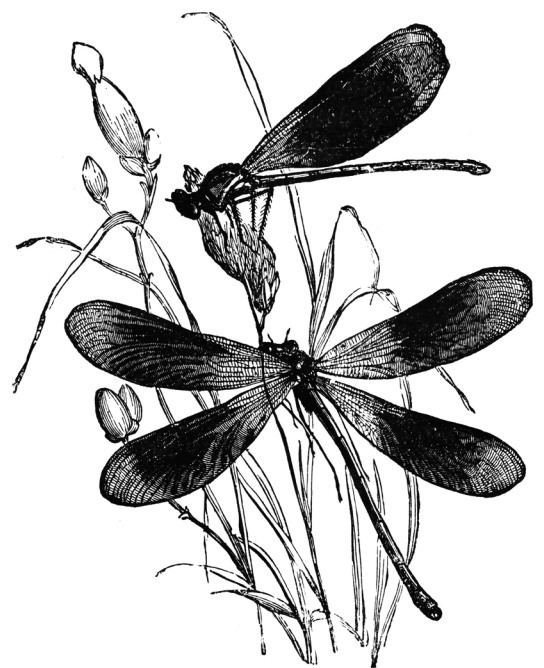
He turned his back on Helga to leave, and her emotions finally caught up with her. Panic on behalf of her wings had overridden everything else, but now they were bent and twisted to ruin, and he had her ears. Nothing more could be done to them, and therefore nothing more could be done to her. She finally recognized her feelings as anger, and the realization that “Big H” no longer accurately described her hadn’t set in yet.

Helga picked herself up, dropped her backpack for speed, and charged after him. The only warning the boy got was a horrific yowl more befitting a cougar than a fairy kitty, and then she tackled him and started hitting him.

The rat boy lost his dignity, but Helga lost the fight. Bruised and ashamed, she would not wear her wings in public again except under a thick, protective jacket until she was seventeen.

Unfortunately, the policy came too late to help her. In the world of public schooling, six years of infamy could not be erased that easily. Even with her wings hidden, she was often startled in the hallway by some faux-friendly hand patting up and down her back, searching for the telltale lumps of wire. The ears only lasted a year; the other children were constantly snatching them away. Helga finally switched to plain headbands at school. It wasn’t perfect, but at least she could pretend that the ears were still there, even if no one could see them.

Her wings, however, were a much larger part of her, and she couldn’t give them up for more than an hour at



a time without feeling terribly uncomfortable. Despite the trouble they brought her, she wore them every day, repairing and making new ones as necessary. She found it soothing, the way they pressed flat against the skin of her back, a reassuring plastic presence in an otherwise unsettling era, and Helga developed a nervous habit of twitching her shoulder blades to make sure they were still there. The back-pats, smirks, and meows distressed her, but the thought of getting rid of the wings never entered her mind. She would have sooner cut off an arm.

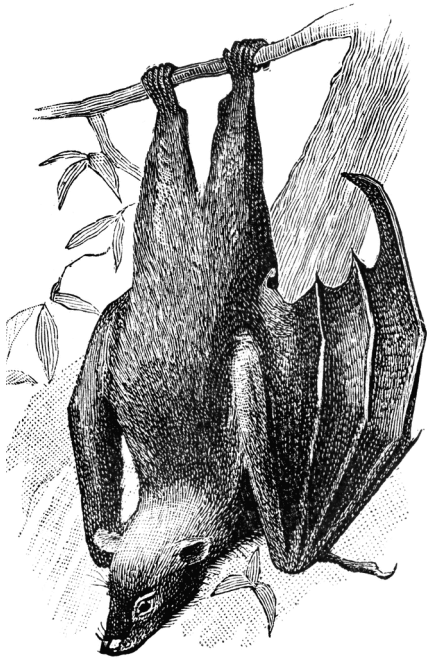
Stress and strain had to be relieved in some constructive way, and so after a couple years of growing, Helga joined the school rugby team, where she took the name of “Big H” again. Her thick cobby body and powerful shoulders were appreciated there, and as in kickball, her muscle trumped social standing. Her teammates saw her taking off and putting on her wings before and after every practice, but seeing the singular vigor with which Helga plowed into others, they left the matter of wings and ears out of all conversation, focusing instead on the cups in Australia and Britain. In this way, Helga managed to get through school in fair mental health and with fairy kitty identity intact.

At seventeen, she still wore wings under her clothes; the jeering had subsided, but the isolation had not, and she still played rugby with unsettling enthusiasm. She was sitting winged and shirtless in the locker room one day, chiseling chunks of mud and grass from her cleats with a screwdriver, when she found herself approached by one of her teammates.

“What’s up, Mattie?” Helga inquired, prying a chunk of sod from her shoe.

“Not much, H.” Mattie stood there in silence for a while after that, shifting from foot to foot. She was a smaller, rather accident-prone girl, one of the team wingers, and she had only recently joined the team after having transferred from another school. The wings were still new to her; Helga could feel her staring.

Well, here it came, Helga thought with resignation. It was about time someone had a problem. Her shoulder blades twitched, and she continued knocking at her shoe, waiting for the storm.



“You never wear your ears in here,”  
Mattie blurted.

Helga paused, then looked up. “What?”

“Your ears,” Mattie repeated. “You never wear them.” Seeing Helga staring at her, she rubbed her hands together and babbled on, “I mean, I’ve just, I heard you were a fairy kitty, not just a fairy, and that you used to wear ears, but you only wear the wings, and so—yeah.”

Helga sat there, screwdriver hanging forgotten from her hand. Her mind sifted through the information, searching for a possible joke. But Mattie looked far too nervous to be playing a prank, and there was currently no one else in the locker room to see her. And though Helga didn’t consider herself as having many friends, she’d never had a problem with Mattie.

“How’d you hear about the ears?” Helga finally asked.

“H, everybody knows about the ears.”

Helga looked away.

“So. I mean. If you want to, I don’t think there would be a problem.” Mattie tried a smile. “I mean, the team likes you. I like you. It’s okay.”

“I’ll think about it. Why you mention it?”

Mattie was silent for a good long while. Then she said, “Fairy kitty, right?”

“Yeah.” It had been a long time, but the old patter still came to her. “It’s like a kitty, only with dragonfly wings, but for some reason, I wasn’t born like that. I’m used to it, but...” she shrugged.

“You don’t exactly look like you’d be flittering around the flowers.”

“Can’t help the species; I didn’t choose it.”

"I know." Mattie smiled ruefully. "I'm a fruit bat."

Helga burst out laughing. "For serious?"

Mattie spread her arms as though to say, what can you do? "And I hate bananas. Though I used to spend all of kindergarten hanging from the monkey bars; they called me 'Batty Mattie.'"

"You're joking me. You're kidding. 'Batty Mattie'? Oh God..."

"I know, right? It's just... yeah. Sorry I didn't speak up sooner, but—"

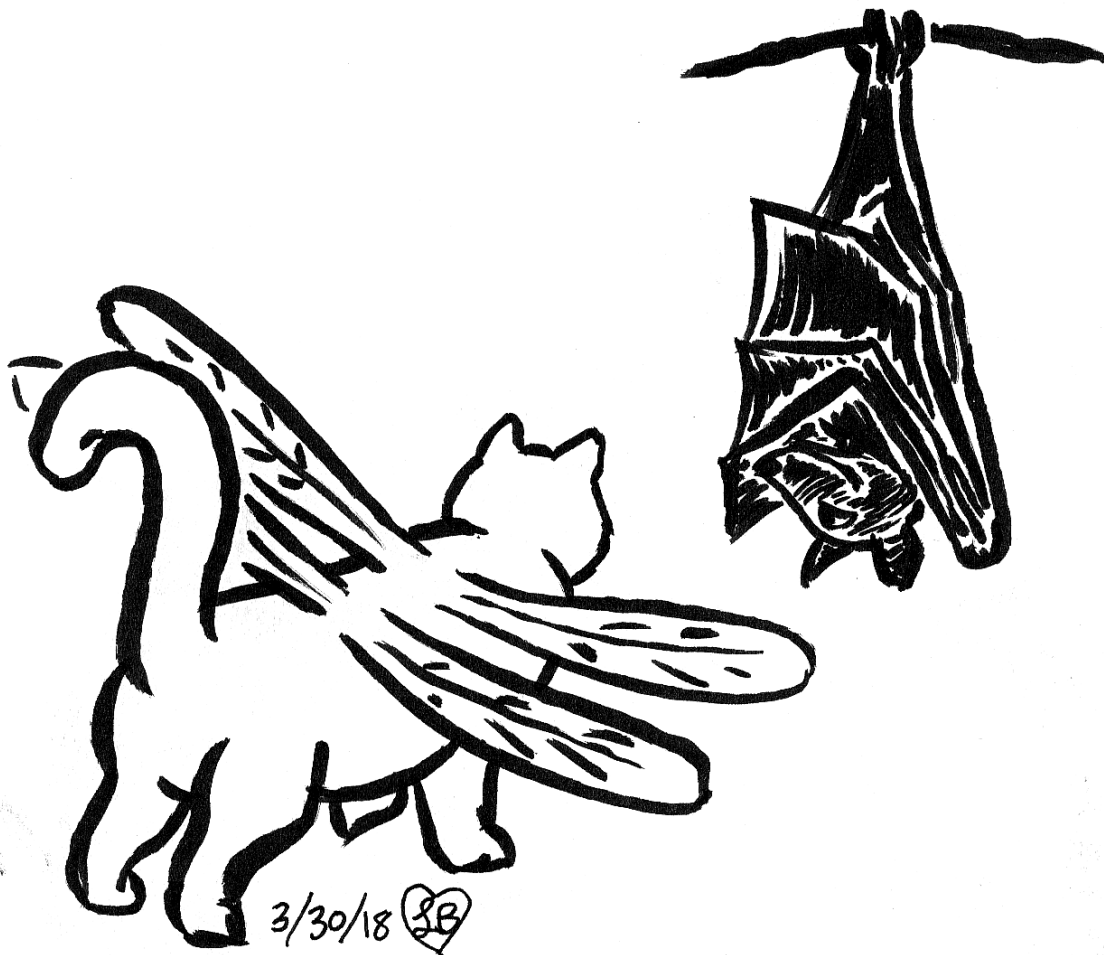
"No, don't, don't!" She put the screwdriver aside. "I don't blame you; I've just been doing it so long, I'm used to it. Wouldn't wish it on somebody else."

There was a long, thoughtful pause.

"You wanna wear wings together someday?" Mattie asked.

"You don't got any, I could make you a mean pair," Helga replied with a grin.

Apparently rugby attracted the right kind of people.

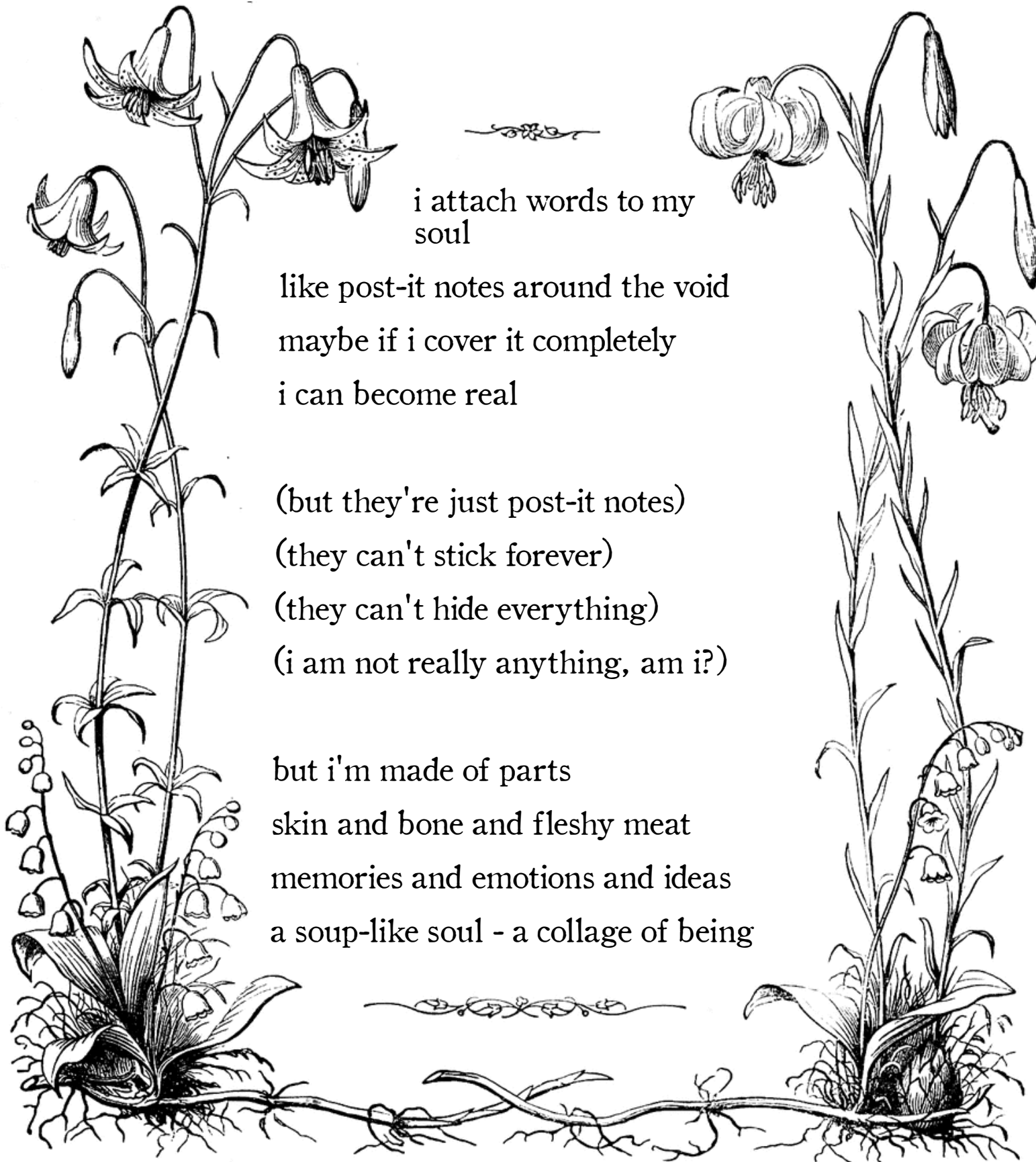




# **R**eal enough for me

By Anonymous

CW: feelings of dissociation, a short description of a body in a non-graphic visceral way



i attach words to my  
soul

like post-it notes around the void  
maybe if i cover it completely  
i can become real

(but they're just post-it notes)  
(they can't stick forever)  
(they can't hide everything)  
(i am not really anything, am i?)

but i'm made of parts  
skin and bone and fleshy meat  
memories and emotions and ideas  
a soup-like soul - a collage of being

am i not real enough? real enough for me?"

and everything on a deeply, deeply subconscious level. I've recently

connected to the otherkin community because of these feelings- specifically the nonhuman, voidkin, and eldritchkin sub-communities. I

haven't "found myself" in these communities so to speak, but I have

been comforted by their presence and acceptance.



# awyer's Life

By Reese Pender

“Mrrr...” They grumbled, clumsily slamming their hand into the alarm clock. 9:30 AM. Pausing, they stared at the time as it ticked up a singular minute. They didn’t want to go through the whole wakeup routine process, but they didn’t exactly have a choice anymore. They went through all this trouble and got this far, so there was no point in letting it go to waste.



Stumbling to the bathroom, they opened the cabinet under the sink to pull out their medication. Three shots in the thigh, not dissimilar to an EpiPen. They’d need to get a refill at the end of the week. Rubbing their face, they take a deep breath before opening the curtain that was blocking the mirror. Staring at the part human, part Tobi-Kadachi face. Their eyes met with the mix of pale skin and blue scales, looking over their short, black hair. It was messy, but not that bad.

A snout had formed on their face. Their eyes had begun to change to a red color, their pupils beginning to shift into a slit shape. They had grown a short tail, the tips of their fingers and toes looking more like claws than anything. Blue scales began to adorn their body. They opted for an anthropomorphic appearance, as going quadrupedal would make them require a handler for most tasks. They liked having their own independence, so they decided against that.

Grabbing the first shot, they took a deep breath while injecting it into their thigh. Letting out a small noise of pain, they let out a sigh of relief afterward. The first shot was a general painkiller, one meant to ease any aches and whatnot from the transformation. It didn’t hurt aggressively, just ached all over. The painkiller was made specifically for the process since it was designed specifically to avoid interference

with the next two shots.

The second shot was next, with a significantly larger and more painful needle in it. It contained whatever sort of concoction was in it meant to modify their genetic code. They didn't fully understand it themselves, but it worked. They're a kennel worker, not a doctor. Another deep breath in, another shot. Letting out a soft groan, they muttered, "Damn it."

Finally, the third. Some sort of stabilizer or something, meant to make the genetic modification or whatever take hold. At least, that's what the doctors told them. No point in questioning it if it worked. This one hurt the most, at least to them. It had this weird sort of afterburn to it. Only lasted 5 minutes tops, but it was very annoying. Deep breath in, injection. "Motherfucker." they muttered.

Splashing their face with water, they groaned as they looked at the reflection. Letting out a chuckle, they thought over the irony of their job. An animal who took care of other animals? It was almost comedic in a way, but that's just how it was for them. Grabbing their toothbrush and toothpaste, they began to brush over their varying sizes of teeth. Some that of a Tobi-Kadachi, others that of a human.



Grabbing their work outfit, they put on their t-shirt branded with the shelter's logo and jeans. They slid their tail through its cutout, muttering slightly as it got caught momentarily. No socks or shoes. Not like those would fit either. Grabbing their keys and locking their apartment door on the way out, they made their way to their car and got inside. After spending a minute or so adjusting their tail to a comfortable position, they began to wonder about getting a seat with a hole for their tail. Starting the car, they headed to the shelter.

As they walked into the building, they immediately noticed something new about the receptionist. “Hey, Tim. You dye your ears or something?”

The pudgy anthropomorphic Australian Shepherd let out a happy chuckle, replying, “Yeah! Though, just a little bit. Hey, your nose’s looking better this week, Sawyer!”

They smiled a bit. “Thanks, man. Gotta get to the dogs, make sure Terry’s all set.”

“Got it, got it. See you at lunch break?”

“Course.”

Walking to the back area, they shook out their right leg, which felt a little stiff. A combination of the drive and sleeping weird, they guessed. “Terry?” They called out, watching the figure of a large man stand up from behind a stack of dog food boxes. The combination of a brown mullet with a sort of fauxhawk in the middle was always a unique choice in their mind. The black t-shirt was fine, but the flowy tan pants were a bit much. Especially with how often they’d hear the man exclaim at them getting snagged. Though, they supposed people would wanna look like they did in their source.

“Yeah?” He replied. “And, stop calling me Terry. It’s Terra.” They opened the garage-style door that led to the fenced-in area meant for the dogs, letting out a ‘pfft’ noise.

“I know, like, 5 different versions of you. Be glad you’re the one with the nickname. Or, I could call you what I did in high school-”

“Please don’t.”

“Terr-bear.”

The man let out a long groan, dragging his right hand across his face, which prompted Sawyer to let out a brief laugh.

They headed outside, inspecting the fence and gates. They were made to overhang the enclosed area specifically to avoid dogs trying to jump over them, with the added benefit of allowing



them to put up a canopy for bad weather. Tornados and stuff didn't get where they lived, just lots of snow and rain. It didn't get put up all the time during normal snow and rain, only when it got bad.

Walking back inside, they opened up the kennels of most of the dogs, making sure they all went outside. About 2/3rds of the dogs were allowed to go outside together since they didn't show any aggression toward each other. The remaining 10 dogs needed to be taken outside separately. Terra was the one who tended to do that since the guy was massive and could wrangle the dogs if he needed to. They were only about 5'6" and didn't do any sort of muscle-building stuff, leading to them having a lean frame.

They half-zoned out as they went through the workday.



Cleaning kennels, feeding the dogs, checking them over for injury, replacing any bandages, bringing them inside, brushing them, combing them, etc. Simple but menial tasks that they had down to muscle memory, so they could just let their body enter autopilot, so to speak. That was until they fell over, their right foot seeming to have shifted in shape slightly. "God damn it," they said, mumbling obscenities as they stood up. It wasn't a major change, but it threw them off balance. Getting up,

they were greeted by a large husky screaming right in their face. They went back to brushing the dog, though no longer working on autopilot.

After they finished with the husky, it was time for lunch. They didn't eat their lunch yesterday, so they just left it in the break room fridge. Washing their hands in the bathroom beforehand, they grabbed a chicken salad sandwich from the fridge. It was weird, craving food that didn't really exist, but whatever. Poultry was close enough for their tastes. Stretching after they finished their meal, Tim soon walked in. They were a fast eater, and Tim usually went and got food somewhere for lunch, so the timing

made sense to them. Seemed like he had gotten something from Burger King.

“Hey, I’ve been wondering, where’s Vergil?” Tim asked, speaking between bites of his burger. “I haven’t seen him in a while.” They... didn’t really know, so they gave Tim a brief shrug. Opening their phone, they let out a long ‘uhh...’ as they scrolled through the shelter’s group chat, looking for a message from the white-haired man. After a minute or so, they finally found what they were looking for. “He’s on a family vacation with Nero. Said something about trying to become a better dad and spend time with his son that doesn’t involve just noemata.”

Tim let out a chuckle in response to that. “For a while, he refused to have anything to do with his son after finding him. It took, like, a week of talking to him to get him to realize that he needed to at least be there for his kid in some way. I met his kid, y’know. He’s got a freaky arm, real weird. I don’t really get how he does any of the stuff he does, both of ‘em. Have you ever seen him do the box trick? He has his weird katana thing and he opens the boxes just by doing that anime thing where they’ll have a character barely unsheathe the sword and then it cuts-”

“Tim. You’re rambling again.”

“Sorry, sorry! Force of habit.”

“Yeah, you’ve got a lot of those.” The two let out a laugh, Tim coughing a bit due to having some food in his mouth. The two always ate lunch together, and were pretty close. They had known each other for a while too, longer than they had known Terra. It was always interesting, remembering Tim when they were kids versus looking at him now.

Then, they had an idea. “You, me, and Terra should go out for dinner tonight. Just the three of us. I’ve known you since 2nd grade, you’ve known Terra since high school, and I’ve known him since middle school. It’d be fun. We barely spend time together outside of the shelter.” Some group activity or something would be fun, at least in their mind. It’d make sure they didn’t accidentally drift too far apart, and it would just be entertaining.

“W-With Terra? I mean, uh, sure.” Tim seemed to be

flustered at the thought of spending time with Terra, even though they'd be right there with the two. Sawyer let out a laugh, pointing at the Australian Shephard. They knew what this sort of reaction meant; they had seen it time and time again since they were kids.

“You like Terra! Like, like him, you gay ass!”

“Shut up, at least I know what type of people I'm into.” Tim retorted, his expression shifting to a friendly but teasing grin.

“Ouch. Harsh.” They replied, pretending to be emotionally hurt, clutching their chest and giving Tim puppy dog eyes. “I'm just a romantically confused little lizard, you don't need to be so mean to me.” After a couple seconds of silence, the two broke out laughing. This was the type of jokes they usually made with each other. This sort of gag had been ongoing for a couple years now. Just playful banter between friends.

After the laughing fit ended, Sawyer sat back in their seat, thinking over what to do with this new information. Of course, it'd be best if Tim told Terra himself, but... what if they gave a



little nudge to the two and tried to pass it off as coincidence? Delightfully devilish, Sawyer. Opening up their phone, they looked at restaurants nearby. They all liked Buffalo Wild Wings, so maybe that would be a good idea?

After a long day of working, and much time convincing the both to go with them to BWW; Tim rode with Sawyer since he didn't own a car, while Terra drove alone. It was here that Sawyer would begin to concoct their plan in full. Talking to Tim, they began a small conversation.

“Hey Tim, y’know, Terra’s favorite thing to get here is salt and vinegar fries.” They commented.

“Why are you telling me this?”

“In case you wanna get him a little something to eat.”

There was a long moment of silence before Tim spoke again. “. .. Should I tell him? Y’know, how I feel about him.”

Yes! Perfect! All according to plan! “That’s your call, man. He’s a good guy, you know that. Even if he doesn’t feel the same way he isn’t gonna harass you or something.”

“That’s true,” the Aussie Shepherd replied, seeming to be lost in thought.

Both cars arrived at relatively the same time. Getting inside the restaurant, ordering food, and getting somewhere to sit was also pretty painless. Inside a booth style dining area, Terra sat with Sawyer, while Tim sat across from them. Though, it didn’t take long for the three to start talking and telling stories about each other.

Sawyer spoke up first, grinning. “I remember, when me and Terra were in 6th grade, every time someone scared him, he would slam on his shoulder like he was trying to activate his Keyblade Armor. He did it in dodgeball once, too. Still got hit in the face, though.”

Terra let out a disappointed groan, slouching over the table slightly. “Did you really have to bring that up? He didn’t need to know that, man. I don’t even think I remembered that until you told me.”

Meanwhile, Tim was trying his best not to laugh. Sawyer wasn’t done with stories yet, though. “Oh, well, you should hear about the time in Freshman chemistry when Tim yelped in the middle of class. Someone slammed his phantom tail in a drawer. Of course, this was before he actually grew one, but it was pretty funny.



“Heyyyy! That’s not your story to tell, Sawyer!” Tim piped up, seeming to be rather embarrassed. “Besides, you’re the one who spent an entire half-hour during Geometry staring at a squirrel outside!”

“Shut it, the squirrel was interesting!” They replied, laughing. “You only knew I was staring at it because you started staring too!”

“So what? Doesn’t change the fact you were staring first!”

The three continued with their stories, talking about their experiences together, including the ones they seemed to miss from each other. From 2nd grade to high school, experiences were shared, along with funny stories.

However, the main attraction was yet to happen.

Reese fled to ‘the bathroom’, which was absolutely not the truth. They just kind of... hid around the corner, listening in on Tim and Terra’s conversation.

“...You know, uh... okay, uh... do you remember the time in senior year when you showed up at my house and ended up spending the entire night cuddling me?” Tim asked.

The human’s face immediately began to redden as he replied. “Yeah, what about it? I was sad and just needed someone to be around, that’s all.”

Tim seemed to pause, seemingly a little flustered as he looked around. “I- uh... I think about it sometimes. Why, uh... did you decide to head to my house?”

“Cause you’re my friend and pretty soft. Fluffy too.”

“U-Uh-”

“Tim. Tim. Look at me.”

The two made eye contact, Tim very obviously freezing up from a mix of nervousness and being flustered.

“I know how you feel about me. How about we consider this a date?” And then Terra turned to behind the booth they were



sitting at, looking in the direction of the bathrooms. Sawyer very quickly tried to hide in one before giving up. “Yeah. I see you, Sawyer. You aren’t slick. Get back over here.”

The Tobi-Kadachi in progress let out a defeated huff before walking back over, taking their seat. They sort of... zoned out as the two talked. To be honest, they hadn’t thought of what to do besides the plan of giving the two a moment alone and hoping they’d somehow talk about feelings. They thought over how to handle any changes to their feet. Shoes probably wouldn’t fit right, but they still didn’t have thick enough layering to go barefoot without getting scraped up.

“Sawyer. Sawyer? Sawwwyerrrrrr?”

“Huh?” They said, snapping out of it.

“We’re done eating. Seems like you are too. You still gotta pay, though.” Terra said, chuckling. “Tim’s gonna go to my place. We’re gonna watch a couple movies, maybe go for a walk.”

“O-Oh, yeah, go ahead! Sorry, I was just thinking. You guys go on ahead, just leave what you guys owe and I’ll put the bill together.”

The two men put their portion of the money down before Terra headed towards the door.

“See you later, Sawyer! Er... thank you.” Tim said, giving Sawyer a wave before following the human out.

“No problem!” They replied. They waited a bit, paying for the food with the money that Tim and Terra had left. After that, they got in their car, heading back home. It was truly a good day. They got to have fun with their friends, and have some fun while doing it! The drive home went well, nothing strange in terms of other people driving. Just people not using their turn signals. Again.

As they went inside, they kicked off their shoes, sitting down to take a good look at their foot that was changing a bit. It hadn’t become too different. However, it seemed like their heel had raised up. That’d explain the weird balance issue earlier. Flipping on the lights, they headed to the kitchen, pulling out a can of

cherry cola. Time to relax a bit and watch some TV.

Except, nothing much was on. News. News. More news. Reruns of episodes they've seen 10 times over. Even more news. Ugh. What about streaming services? They hadn't finished that spinoff they'd been wanting to watch, anyways. Except now that got taken off in favor of the broadcasting company wanting more money. Man.

YouTube it was. They put on some DIY video about... a mood ring toilet seat? Now that was definitely weird and worth watching. During the video their phone buzzed with a notification. Picking up their phone, they saw a Discord message from Tim!

SuperAusShep#XXXX at 9:30 PM

thnk u for setting up dinner! i grabbed ur wallet by accident tho oops

lizardinprogress#XXXX at 9:31 PM

motherfucker

just bring it tomorrow

and no problem, twas fun

SuperAusShep#XXXX at 9:31 PM

ok!

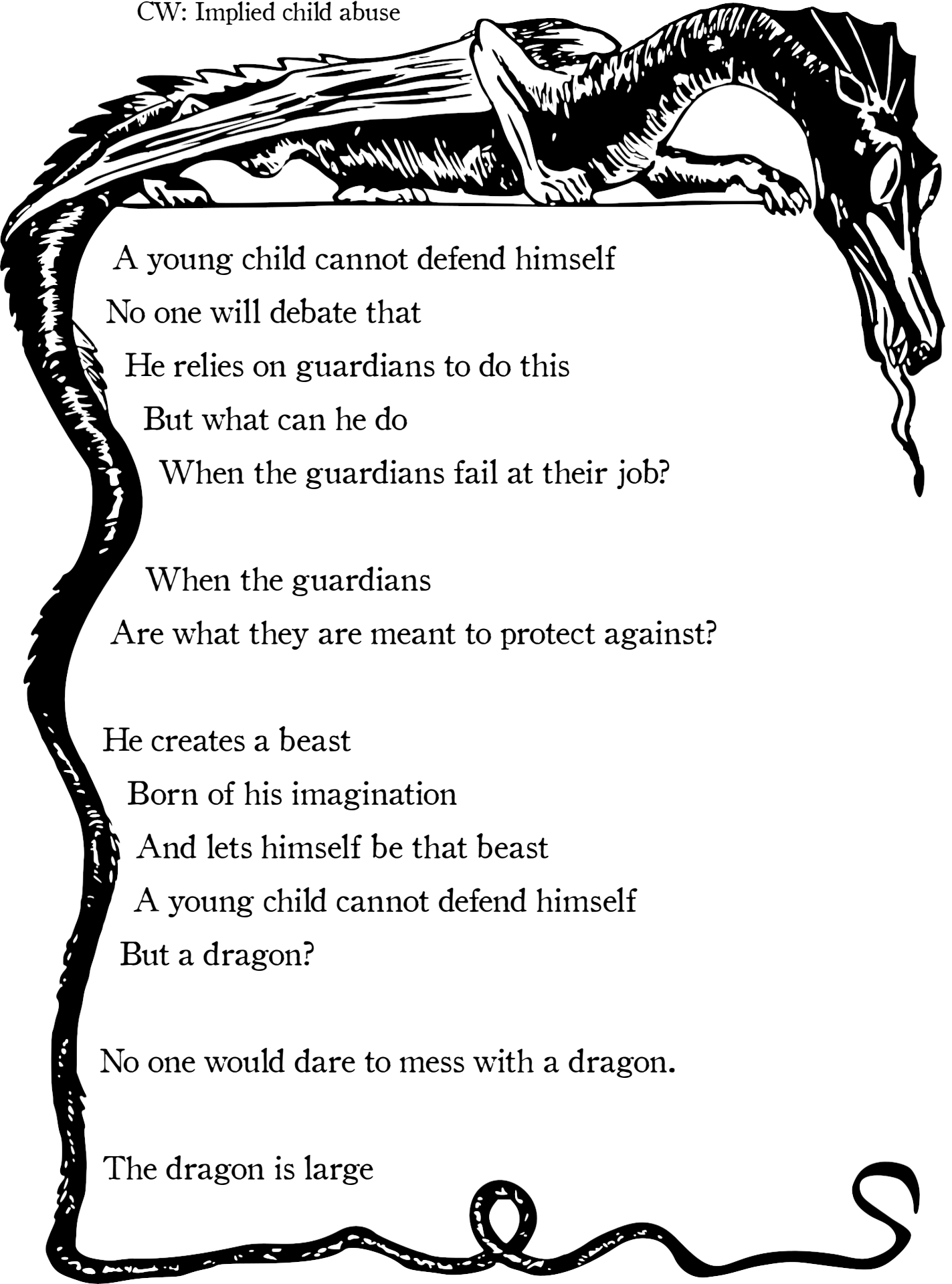
Not like they were gonna use it at the moment. A couple hours passed, and they realized they should probably go to bed. A shower later, and they curled up in their bed after yawning and stretching briefly. Time for bed. Putting on some calming music, they began to drift off into the realm of unconsciousness.

Yeah. That was a good day.

# (Not So) imple

By GrubDog

CW: Implied child abuse



A young child cannot defend himself  
No one will debate that  
He relies on guardians to do this  
But what can he do  
When the guardians fail at their job?

When the guardians  
Are what they are meant to protect against?

He creates a beast  
Born of his imagination  
And lets himself be that beast  
A young child cannot defend himself  
But a dragon?

No one would dare to mess with a dragon.

The dragon is large

The dragon is powerful  
The dragon has teeth and claws  
The dragon has fire and horns  
To be the dragon is to feel okay

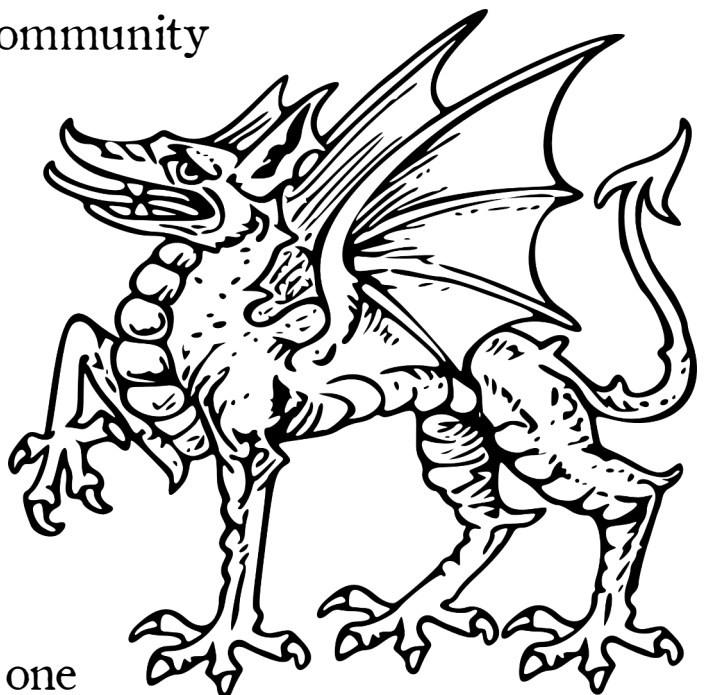
To be the dragon is to feel okay

But after years and years have passed  
And the dragon has served its purpose  
It is still there, unable to leave  
For how much of the boy is now a dragon?  
How much of the dragon is now the boy?

Is he a dragon,  
or does that just make him feel safe?  
Is he a dragon,  
or does he merely want to find community  
amongst the dragons?

He wasn't born a dragon  
Didn't always know he was one  
(If he even is one now)

He also wasn't born a boy  
And didn't always know he was one



(Are these the same thing?)

He sees the dragons

And the dragon people

And even those who are dragons for fun

For as complicated (or simple) as it is for them

They can speak to their experiences

Share them and allow for those

With open minds and open hearts

To understand

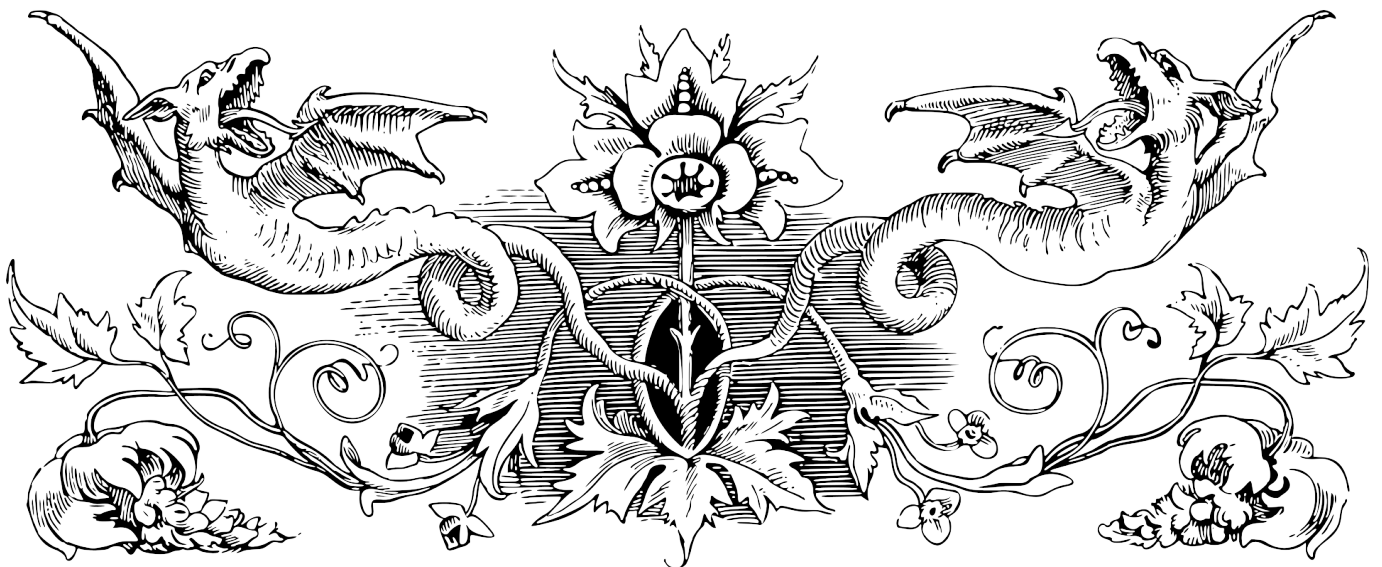
And he wonders

Why can't it be that simple for me?

Or are all of the other complicated stories

Also silenced

Out of not knowing where to start?







# uper-weapon Showdown at the Collapsed Corral

By Fudge

CW: parallels to anti-trans politics, anti-therian bigotry, semi-cartoony violence, death, corporate dystopia, robots getting exploded

“Never mind picking it, just blow the door off!” Even through the camera, I could see Congleton sigh - he loves doing things the neat, tidy way. My camera view: a small tiled room containing a short, bulky man, a vault door, and very little else. Not in view: a small support team to help out later.

Even from half a building away, there was a very audible thump. Perfect. I love it when a good heist comes together.

My little space right then was a small thin room on the second floor, arranged to hold a wall full of CCTV monitors. It was pretty dark; the light switch had been a bit too hard to reach. There were also a pair of chairs - which I wasn't using - intended for bored, underpaid attendants to sit in. The attendants weren't there though, and neither was anyone else (we'd made sure of that).

Well, in theory anyway; I was pretty sure something behind me had just made an un-sound. An un-sound is an empty hole in the landscape of fan whine and mains hum that fills the modern world. Slowly, slowly, I let one ear swivel backward, and pretended I hadn't not heard anything. “Nice work Mr Congleton,” I told my earpiece, “Everyone check in, confirm code phrases, and tell me about the loot!”

I didn't get to hear the reply because the un-sound turned into the sound of someone moving very carefully. With luck, the care they were taking meant that they thought I hadn't noticed, and that they wouldn't notice me breathe in deeply and tense my back legs. Wind whipped past me - my ears pinned back reflexively - as I flung myself upward and backward. The world spun end over end around me, feeling almost lazy as the adrenaline surge ramped up. I got a nice

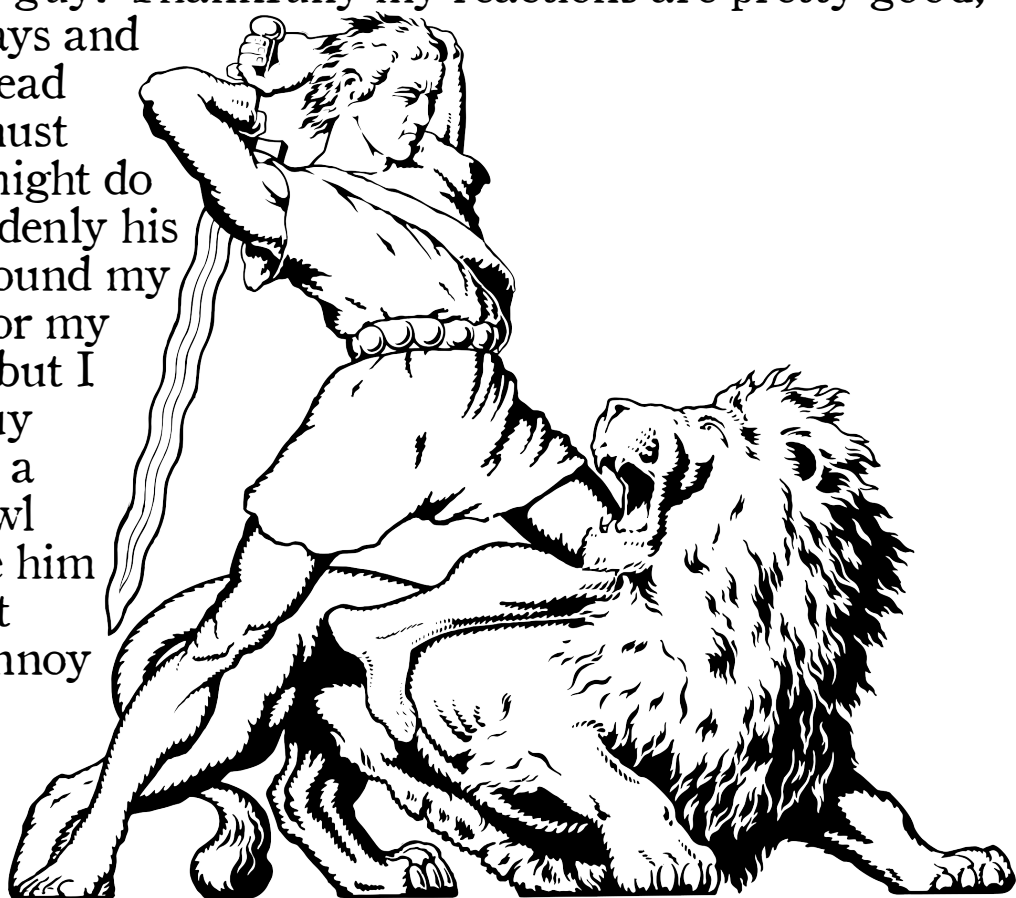
view of a large dark shape that passed underneath me and slammed into the monitors that I'd just been watching. Glad those weren't mine.

If I were in the habit of being tall and walking on two legs I'd have hit the ceiling or still been in the way, but I'm not, so I landed back on all fours behind the intruder with a wall to my left.

...Is someone an intruder if the building is already being broken into?

The dark figure spun, tracking me with impressive speed. Here, in the sculpted black body-armour, face hidden behind an impressive collection of optics, was the guy who'd ruined my city. No time for that now though, so I said, "Can't I fight someone else for once?"

Throwing witty lines is a bit of a habit these days, but usually it helps keep people's brains busy and stops them punching me as quickly. Not this guy. Thankfully my reactions are pretty good, so I rolled sideways and saved myself a head full of fist. He must have guessed I might do that because suddenly his other arm was round my neck. So much for my evil monologue, but I still needed to buy time. I gave him a good meaty growl hoping it'd make him nervous, but that seemed just to annoy him. He tried throwing me at the wall.



I avoided finding out if I'd stick because, like most humans, the Vigilante underestimated how much of me is fur and loose skin. It's a

defence evolved to stop (other) predators getting their teeth into your neck, and it turns out it works on arsehole vigilante guys too. The result was a bizarre compromise, in which I half flopped and half flew my way down the room, sideways, landing awkwardly with two feet under me, one against a wall, and my bum in the corner. “Shite caber toss,” I panted (it’s... a really ingrained habit).

He advanced, an expression of disgust on his face so pure and distilled that it was clearly visible even through his fancy face-gear. It was kind of unsettling. I had a bit more breath now, so I said, “Bad joke?”

“Abomination,” he spat, but kept walking. “You play at being an animal like a child in a cheap costume. You betray your species. You are a pitiful waste of humanity.” It was nicely paced, the end of his little speech reached me just as he did.

That was ok though, that short flight had given me a chance to get a paw to my ear-piece, and I reckoned it was probably fun time now. “Yeah, well,” I riposted weakly, “the ill-built tower trembles mightily at a butterfly’s passage!” He had the good grace to look slightly confused, which gave me a moment to throw myself sideways.

My operatives must have recognised the code phrase and figured out that something was up, because a moment later the back wall wasn’t. Good timing too, one of the Vigilante’s boots ruffled the fur on my tail as it passed, and left a nice neat hole in the plasterboard behind where I’d just been.

Everyone in the next room was already leaving, mostly hidden by the clouds of dust, exactly as we’d agreed. I didn’t have time to take much in, other than the window designated our escape route, a mess of debris, and the scatter of broken glass by the window. Walking through broken glass isn’t my thing given my lack of footwear, but it wasn’t that hard to jump clean over it anyway. On my way out I took a moment to turn and yell, “Next time, maybe try being less human!” It might not have been the best time for verbal sparring, or the best insult, but some habits die hard.

On the other side of the window was a freshly acquired

helicopter. It was tight with all of us jammed into the back compartment, but I still found enough space to lick my grazes as we soared away. Mission complete.

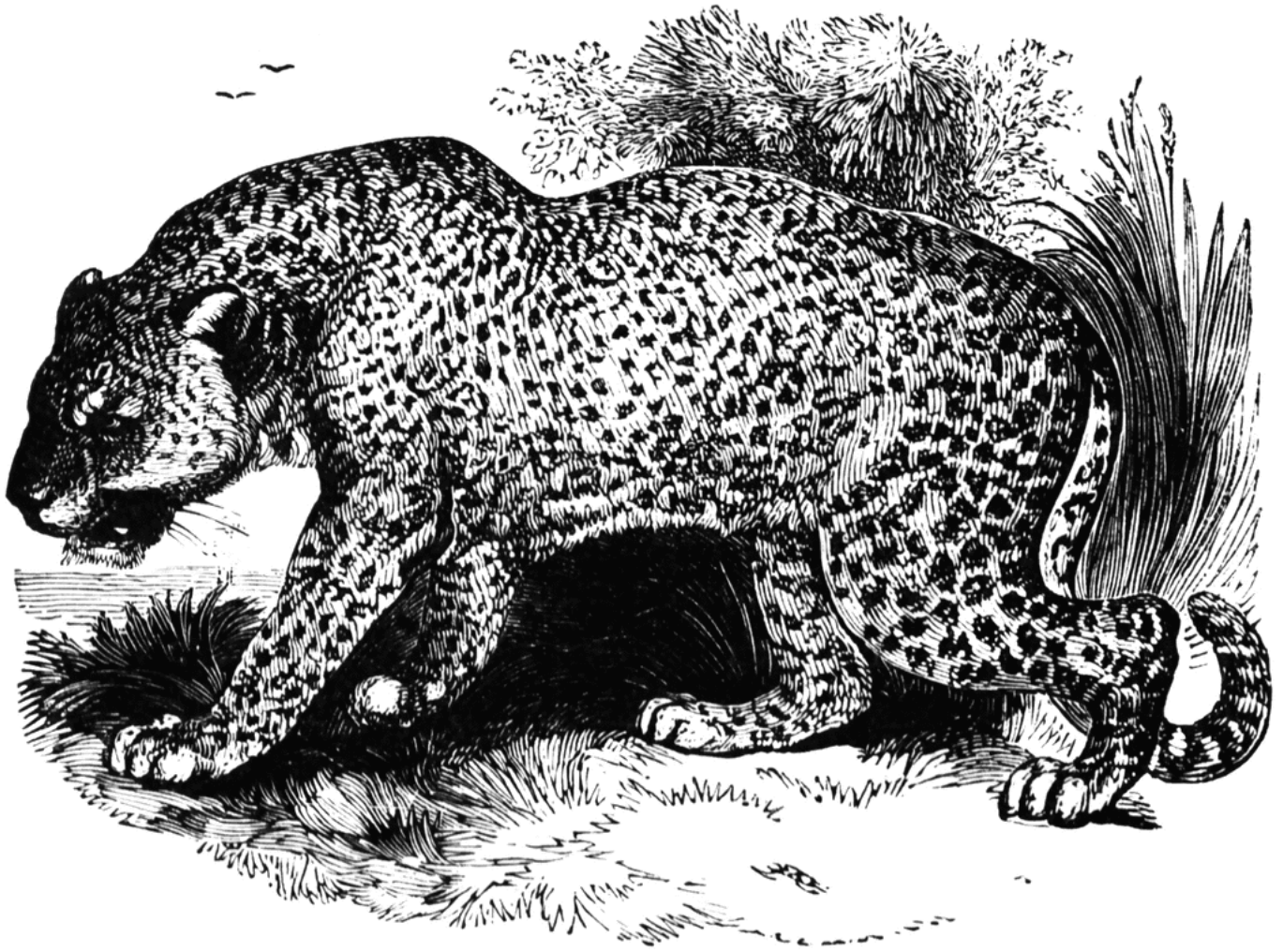


So anyway, I promised there'd be time to talk about the city's least favourite vigilante - and I don't mean me, they love me I'm sure - so I guess this is where I turn to camera and say, 'As you know...'

As you know, Angst Over Lime used to be a perfectly average grimy city with a slightly higher than average crime rate. Like, 2% above mean. Now it's a glimmering love-letter to complicated shapes made of glass and concrete that big corporations like living in. The streets are cleaner than your average dinner plate, and dinner plates round here tend to be picked much cleaner than average now.

This isn't entirely the Vigilante's doing, but it certainly has a lot to do with his friends in their executive sky-scraper offices, and he's something of a linchpin. The load-bearing arsehole. He doesn't call himself a hero at least, he calls himself a necessity. Most people try not to mention him, or if they do they give the nearest rooftop a quick look just to check. Sure, crime rates are basically zero, but it's funny how unexplained disappearances aren't a statistic the cops track anymore.

Anyhow, that's basically why we're here. Not 'here' as in the scuffle in the secure government storage place - that's just stealing for fun and profit - more 'here', as in the secret underground lair, the shadowy machinations, the diabolical plots. Here, where I'm Maria, Queen of the Underworld, The Cat Woman's Cat/Woman, the Horror that Haunts the Pigeons in West Park... Need-er of a Proper Grandiose Title. Professional snowleopard super-villain-ess!



When we got home, I left Congleton to make arrangements for the use of our loot - government secrets, freshly purrrloined. A goon passed in a rush, stopping for a moment to relay the message that someone was waiting for me downstairs. They'd have to wait though, because I needed to have a chat with one of the lesser political players in the city first. Ex political players. I'd made fairly sure she wouldn't be causing us any more trouble with medical premises licensing.

"Ms Gena, welcome to my humble underground lair! I hope the trip here wasn't too... uncomfortable."

She was wearing a rumpled grey suit and looking both shocked and rather tired. The wide-eyed expression made it particularly difficult to look her in the eye, so I smiled toothily at the wall just behind her right ear instead. Her earrings were kind of interesting, but they exactly didn't go with the suit.

“From your expression, I’m guessing you weren’t expecting a meeting with a snow leopard?”

Had she really not heard of me? My species is usually the thing people make a fuss about, after all.

“We are still rather rare I’m told. Mind your step.” I directed her into the main lift. She remembered how to talk and said, “I-I assume this makes you the mastermind of this operation?”

“Ah! I’m glad you aren’t looking for a puppet master pulling my strings! People sometimes ask how ‘it’ is trained, which is a little aggravating.” I reserve it/its for people I know well, for the record.

“Mastermind?” I continued, “Well, perhaps, but I pride myself on the collaborative atmosphere of this organisation. My team are extremely capable, as your office recently discovered.”

She frowned, but said nothing, so I pushed the button marked ‘floor -14 (throne room)’. The lurch caught her off guard and she swayed woozily.

“My apologies for the after-effects of the short-term memory disruptor,” I said, “It’s regrettable but we can’t risk anyone remembering the route here.” See also: the sort-of-fake chemical plant on the surface, the room full of radio jamming kit, and employing the kind of dedicated information security expert who has cat ears and memorable socks.

“Mm, I’m sure,” Gena said, “So why is it exactly that you’ve brought me here?”

“What do I want? Well, really very little. Simply an agreement that you and your colleagues will not meddle further in our activities.”

The lift started on it’s long descent, light streaming in through it’s one wall-filling window as we cleared the sub-basement of the above-surface facility.

Instead of enjoying the view, Gena turned to me.

“The medical facility I had shut down contained some very



sophisticated equipment. You could have been curing cancer! But instead, all you seem interested in is— is—”, she snorted derisively, “turning people into animals!”

She took a breath and continued, “Your operation was impressively competent. Were some of its activities not shockingly illegal in this jurisdiction, it could have been a very profitable asset to the city.”

I snorted. “First, as I imagine you’re well aware, we do a good deal more than that. Second, profit is irrelevant. Third, and most importantly, your biggest mistake is assuming that this is a zero-sum game. We can have both! An end to cancer, and the freedom to be who we are.”

Gena looked like she wanted to interrupt, but I kept talking. “I very much doubt either of us is going to change the other’s mind, so let me make this simple. Filling your office with jello was not only easy, it was fun.” Her expression soured even further, which was somehow still possible.

We were passing the bio-lab bubbles, which don’t look like all that much, but meant we’d soon be passing some of the good stuff. She was still looking the wrong way, so I said, “Look out the window. We are in the heart of my evil lair. I’m the bad guy. Either you cooperate with my unreasonable demands, or I will arrange for what remains of your department’s tattered credibility to go up in flames. Comically. Whimsically. But also, terminally.”

Verbal intimidation is one thing, but I tend to find sheer implied firepower more reliable. Conveniently, Gena finally chose to turn and look properly out of the window just as the lighting gantries over the construction hangar came into view. Welding torches bathed the space below in flickering light, casting warped shadows through the scaffolds. My guest was silent. Presumably it was finally getting through to her that we weren’t joking.

“What am I looking at?” she said, flatly.

“Mm, now you’re asking,” I said, “We’re just preparing for a first plugs-in test of our new giant robot. It’s very exciting! This will be the first real test of our portable reactor prototype.”

It'll be even more 'exciting' if it turns out the engineering team forgot to include an emergency breaker again. A rogue self-powered battle-mech is a great way to make a lot of mess very rapidly.

"W-Where did you get the materials?" Gena stuttered.

"Remember the convoy of trucks that went missing delivering to a local arms company a while back?"

"Ah, no?" she said, eyebrows knitting.

"Funny that, not many people do."

I looked up at her, doing my best to smile disconcertingly. It's pretty easy with feline sized, uh... canines. That convoy had been just the boost our space programme needed.

"Did you like the bio-labs?" I asked, casually. Gena glanced at me, apparently to try and work out if I was joking.

"I don't think I saw them. What are those for? Turning the rest of us into—" She saw my expression, remembered where we were, and abruptly course-corrected herself into silence.

I guess I could have played up the "maybe I should, perhaps you'd learn something" angle, it'd have been good for the whole villain aesthetic, but ugh. It took me a long time to get into a... configuration... I'm happy with, and I don't want to imagine putting someone else through that.

"I'm very proud of those. They're our new economic policy," I said instead.

"I... see." She definitely didn't.

Long story short, one of the bank bigwigs recently responded to comments about the ongoing housing crisis. "Money doesn't grow on trees," he said, in a public meeting. And well, yes. Yes, I dare say it doesn't. Yet.

Gena's expression hardened. "And what if I tell someone about this little tour? Or are you going to erase my memory again?"

"What would be the point of giving a tour you wouldn't

remember?" I replied, "But anyway, I wouldn't advise mentioning it, they'll all want to see! The lift isn't big enough!" She was still trying not to annoy me, but some of a glare escaped anyway.

"So... what if you do?" I said, "There's this super-villain's lair... somewhere... and it's got a giant robot in it and it's run by a cat'? How do you think that'll go? I mean, they know we're around, but equally this is coming from the department whose 'incompetence' recently got pictures of their jelly-filled office in the headlines. Who did they pin the blame on, by the way?"

I knew exactly who they'd pinned the blame on. She stared out of the window, icily.

Gena had a point actually, and it's part of why she was there. The one thing we don't carefully contain on-site are outlandish stories. Rumours can do wonders for the reputation, and reputation is very important in my... line of work.

"So, next time you receive a licensing request for a particular site?"

"I'll see that it's approved," Gena said sullenly.

"Excellent! I'm glad we're on the same page."

The lift arrived, and I pawed the big double doors to the throne room open with a flourish, mentally thanking the designer for including a motor-assist, for the hundredth time. I gave Gena a moment to take in the steel throne, spot lit atop its dais, reaching for the gothic arches above and flanked by a pair of goons behind.

She looked at me with one eyebrow raised, "a 'collaborative atmosphere'?"

"This is the 'striking fear into the hearts of our foes' department," I said.



Having disposed— found temporary quarters for Ms Gena, I wound up in the kitchen. Your usual office fare, it was just about big enough to hold some chairs, a table, ritual implements of hot beverage summoning, and a microwave with splatters no one felt like identifying. It had been a long day, and for all I've changed over the years - and biological incompatibility - my caffeine addiction seems to have somehow survived.

I was only just warming up to my bowl of tea-approximation when one of the throne goons appeared, and reminded me we had another guest who I'd honestly kind of forgotten about.

"It's the annoying one," she said. That time again, huh?

"Right, thanks Alissa. Usual routine I guess."

We'd tried the old-school villain aesthetic. Me sat on a cushion on someone's lap, then them sat on the throne and scratching between my ears. The overall effect was more comical than sinister, and none of us was best pleased about the breach of personal space. In the end, I just sit on the throne and the two throne goons do their best not to laugh if I flub a line.

The doors opened. "Ah, James. I've been expecting you. Nice fronds by the way."

James straightened their suit primly, they looked every inch the dapper spy. "Oh, 'expecting' were you? That'd be why I've been hanging about down here for the last half hour. And look what the cat dragged in and all."

"Well, that's how I was sure you'd be here, so I could expect you. And nobody dragged me anywhere, I brought myself."

James raised an eyebrow disparagingly, "yes, exactly, what the cat dragged in."

"Having established that you were, indeed, expected, why exactly are you here, my leafy special agent?" The special agent smoothed their fronds appreciatively.

"Oh, you know, have to keep an eye on the ne'er-do-well movers and shakers of the international stage. That stage has had plenty enough moving and shaking lately, poor thing must be

right dizzy.”

I snorted. “Flattering as the implication is, I know full well I’m not important enough to warrant being personally surveilled. Especially not every Thursday. Whoever’s Majesty’s offices out of coffee again?”

Mx Frond wilted a little. “They keep cutting funding for office supplies.” They sighed with a melodramatic flourish, adding, “and everywhere else I go, I say ‘I work for the secret service’, y’know, and they say, ‘Who? Oh, didn’t they pack that in years ago?’”

I did my best to look sympathetic, but honestly I have no idea why James keeps working for a country most people forget exists. Why it still has a secret service in any capacity is beyond me.

“Well, I’m sure one of your gadgets can tell you where the instant is,” I said, trying not to sound too unkind. “Just try not to run into any supplies of experimental plant transformation serum this time.”

I’d set that incident up deliberately, but I think they know that I know that it wasn’t exactly a trap. I mostly just expected them to ignore the stuff, or quietly steal it, not take one look at the fuming beaker, shrug, and down the whole thing. It seemed to have worked out for them.

They’d lightened up a lot since, and many of their more irritating features seemed to have faded along with the hyper-masculine façade. We couldn’t exactly be friends, given current circumstances, but I must admit they had become something of a fixture.

World’s sappiest spy perked up at the mention of tech, “Hm, that reminds me. What make you of them earrings that boring bureaucrat of yours was wearing?”

It took me a moment to remember. “What? Uh, they were okay, I guess?”

They looked a little frustrated at my apparent cluelessness. “Those are cutting edge! Serious kit, veeery fancy! Who did you annoy?”

Uh-oh, I thought. Out loud, I said, “What... kind of serious kit, exactly?”

Their eyes glittered in the way only an excited nerd’s eyes can glitter. “Latest passive tracking beacon technology! Epsilon-band long-wave retro-reflector nano-array! Great at extended long-range positioning, baseband boost to compensate for heavy signal distortion!” The techno babble continued, but I let it wash over me while I thought the problem over.

Eventually I had to interrupt their gushing monologue, “Sorry James, I gotta speak to someone.”

“Yeah, me!” they shouted after me as I leapt off the throne.

I savoured the single fluid motion and then found my way to an intercom panel. It took a minute to key in the infosec office number with one claw, but at least we’d chosen a call button design large enough that I could just slap that with a paw. The speaker crunched into life, filling my ears with a sound like an angry cat practising judo on a fire extinguisher.

“Hi, Eileen?”

The yowling and banging paused for a moment, “Bit busy right now!”

“I guessed,” I said, “but we might have a problem.”

“Problem. Problem! Ahaha, you’re telling me!” There was some more banging and the sound of Eileen cackling.

I gave her a moment before prodding, “How so?”

“One minute it’s all hunky dory, next minute this whole thing is on fire!” There was another strangled cat noise. “Oops, sorry. I haven’t had this much fun in weeks!” She has a strange taste in fun, as is often the case with computer security people.

“What is, Eileen?”

“Fun, or on fire? Well, I mean everything is both now, but I think it started with some of the fancier jamming kit. Something completely hosed it, so I’d guess someone really wanted to get a signal out. Or in!” Something sizzled. “Anyway, it was like



nothing I've even seen before, it was so cool!"

Anything it thinks is cool spells trouble, and that was all the confirmation I needed. I said what I always say when I'm not enjoying guessing right.

"Aw crap."

Someone knew where we were.



As it was there wasn't really much we could do. Just wait, and see if someone arrived to cause trouble. A few days passed without anything happening, and I started to wonder if anything would. New tech often means military, and this would hardly be the first time we'd been let off by government people being inconceivably useless. The day of our first outdoor test of the robot - now dubbed Locomotive Hazard - arrived, so we went ahead with our plan.

Things started well. We got the shipping containers into position just off North Street mini-roundabout without any unwanted attention, and the crew started unpacking the machine.

10:02 AM, Thursday 2nd of February

It's never good when there start being dates and times. If it's any consolation, we didn't wreck any planes, so this isn't an air-accident report.

The road through North Junction was quiet. That meant plenty of space for people to run screaming from the oncoming behemoth, with minimal chance of actually killing anyone we didn't mean to. Or of anyone getting close enough to accidentally find a way to break our new toy before we'd even got going. I'll never forget the day we lost an entire doomsday zeppelin to some kid with a toy gun. A whole detention facility un-doomed, thanks

to two foam darts and a dodgy engine cowelling.

As Hazard got ready to heavy metal, I was finding my way into a mostly unoccupied building nearby. I like being on site for these, they make me excited like a cat with several problems but also an excavator full of dynamite, and I like being useful too. I had a few tools strapped into my work jacket, plus a lightweight bi-pod with binoculars on top. There was a toilet three floors up, so I scrabbled the lock closed, pulled the blind with my teeth, and setup my binoculars.

The eyepieces were just starting to make my whiskers really itch when there was a crash of shattering wood, and a confused honk from a car horn. Between the slats of the blind, I could see Hazard haul itself up onto it's six legs and smash its way through the remains of the construction barriers.

On time, and on budget. That's something only fiendish villainy can achieve in an engineering project.

Two cars screeched to a halt, did hasty multi-point turns over the roundabout, and roared away. The few pedestrians gave various goggling stares and screams before vanishing down the street. Perfect.

11:48 AM

By the time the first news crew arrived, things were really warming up. A fuel tanker had come round the corner too fast, and hadn't been able to stop quickly enough. The driver must have got an amazing front-row seat for a huge metal claw smashing into the tarmac right in front of them, before they bailed out of the cab and ran for it.

The Hazard team are a well oiled crew now, having no less than four super-weapon maiden carnages under their belt. They know an opportunity when it parks in front of their giant robot.

Minutes later Hazard was doing tricks, juggling the whole truck in its front legs. I wondered idly who'd come up with that, but then Eileen's beaming face appeared in my mind's eye, grin sparkling with fangs and destructive glee, and I stopped wondering. People like that are worth their weight in something

extremely valuable, Technetium-99, say.

11:54 AM

I was on the move, I had a job to do here too. The news crew were just getting their camera rigged up. It looked like they'd probably get good viewing numbers, given that Locomotive Hazard had been doing its best to cause flying debris and lakes of liquid flame for the last five minutes.

11:55:40 AM

The times getting more accurate isn't good either.

I skidded round the corner of my building. Someone in a brightly coloured dress was yelling into a camera, struggling to be heard over the crunching thunder of robo-playtime. Four legs and a tail are great for fast corners, and I dodged and weaved my way behind the news van without anyone noticing. From there I had a clear line to their antenna.

Hauling the jammer out of my jacket was frustrating, but once it was out the big rubber handle made setting it up easy enough. Its little preview screen showed the video I was replacing the live news with.

11:56:20 AM

On my screen, a tiny goon told the watching audience that this was a dress rehearsal, and that the real thing would happen tomorrow at 3 PM at the Centenary Plaza office building. Pretty much the whole thing had gone out by the time someone at the TV studio found an off switch. Something about the sounds from behind the news van had changed though.

11:58:33 AM

I risked sticking my head round one of the tires, and saw the camera operator pointing excitedly. Hazard was backing away from something in the road. It took a minute to pack the jammer away, and then I rocketed back toward my bathroom window.

12:01:03 PM

Through the binoculars, I could see a black clad figure stood in front of Hazard, face covered by augmented vision gear. That seemed a bit much, like someone wearing sunglasses indoors, at night. The Vigilante was fiddling with something, so presumably he had a plan that didn't involve staying there and becoming Pancake Man.

A huge metal leg came whistling down and there was a mighty crunch. I had a moment of fleeting hope, but then the little figure rolled out from behind Hazard's leg. There was a bright flash, and the huge machine reared back.

That hadn't been the crack of a conventional weapon, so he must have something interesting. It's tempting to say that I had a trick up my sleeve too, but the only clothes I wear are gear like the jacket which doesn't have sleeves. I make jokes, but I'm no one's funny cartoon animal.

12:01:58 PM

Locomotive Hazard dodged the next round and started backing up the road. The Vigilante followed, something at the end of one arm glowing a sickly blue. He dumped the next two rounds of whatever exotic energy weapon into the side of the killer robot, putting up a gout of sparks and molten steel.

A parked trailer nearby held a small boat, which Hazard grabbed and started wielding like a huge fibreglass club. Unfortunately, even with mechanical speed and precision, it turns out it's quite hard to hit a human-sized target with a boat. There was another flicker of energy discharge, and the machine staggered backward again.

It looked rather like the Vigilante was winning.

12:02:18 PM

...bait and switch, that's exactly how it was meant to look!

Watching carefully, I just about saw the shimmer around Hazard as the ace in my metaphorical jacket kicked in. Time to cheat a wee bit.

The next volley of the Vigilante's gun was met by a much

larger light-show coming the other way. He tried again, and again Hazard's damping field ate the bolts with a fierce hissing snap. This could go horribly wrong, the shield system was wildly experimental, and who knew what kind of energy blaster that arsehole had dragged along with him.

12:02:43 PM

The big damn hero looked surprised for a moment, but recovered quickly and brought his arm up again.

He didn't get the chance.

A moment's delay was all it took for Hazard to line up and ram one of its legs half a metre through the spot the Vigilante had just stood, and into the road beneath.

12:03:23 PM

Locomotive Hazard extracted its leg carefully, then pretended it was an industrial shredding machine until it had chewed up what was left of the road. Most of this had been watched by the news crew's camera, so if nothing else it was making exciting TV. The presenter was just starting to breathlessly announce the triumph of evil over good, when there a sudden surge of light.

I rejigged my binoculars frantically.

There, on top of the machine was a slightly dust-spattered figure in body armour. How on Earth had he survived that? Triumphantly, he lowered his glowing weapon toward where the robot's reactor core was hidden, and the light rose to a blinding glare.

Then there was a muted bang, a shower of icy blue lightning, and the little figure was sent cartwheeling off into the rubble below. A hidden gun turret snapped back into Hazard's armour with an emphatic click. The news reporter turned back to the camera, and continued where they'd left off.

12:05:24 PM

I trained my binoculars on the spread-eagled figure of the Vigilante. Having a look at that weapon could give us an

advantage in future, and I didn't want anyone nabbing it. I was just in time to see him crawl away into an alley.

“How tough is this fucker?” I asked the dusty sink to me.

12:10:14 PM

We were beginning to wrap up. Hazard had had a pretty good test run, we'd got our message out, and we'd pretty well beaten the biggest thorn in our side. Hopefully he'd stay away from now on. People were forewarned that we'd be hitting a big office building tomorrow, and I knew that combined with some behind-the-scenes work, everyone below upper-management would be staying well away.

I was packing my binoculars away when I heard something. A distant whump, like a lot of air getting out of the way in a hurry. Given that, by human standards, I have absurdly good hearing, it's pretty likely no one else noticed it. There was just long enough to look out the window and then—

12:10:16.10 PM

—there was a high-pitch whistle somewhere over head and—

12:10:16.22 PM

—something blurred out of the sky and Hazard's retreating form vanished into a sudden cloud of smoke.

The shield squealed and buckled. Its field imploded and let out a very cinematic expanding ring of blue and violet light. Lights up and down the street suddenly went dark.

12:10:16.53 PM

The subsequent overload cascade was the last straw.

We'd designed the reactor for truly outrageous amounts of punishment, given what this robot was built for, but apparently not enough. Hazard's battered power system finally decided enough was enough, and exploded.

The floor jumped and I found myself half way to upside-down, wedged behind a badly cracked toilet.



When I managed to haul myself up to the window again, I found a scene from a disaster film. A lot of the next block had been levelled, and there was a colossal crater where Hazard had been standing. It felt like it was extremely time to go.



Back home, I lay at my desk, and thought about what I'd seen.

We design these sorts of escapades to be spectacular, and if at all possible, extremely expensive for someone we don't like. What we specifically try to avoid, though, is collateral damage to the people who live nearby.

It's all about reputation. Hilariously implausible villainy gets people's attention. Destruction aimed at the corporates and their lackeys gets people's respect. Blowing up granny gets us thrown back to square one.

Thank goodness we'd had the foresight not to build our reactors on any conventional kind of fission principle. I'd never imagined that it could end up in a situation where it would fail like that, and neither had the team who'd designed it.

And what had the situation been anyway?

Whump, whistle, kaboom?

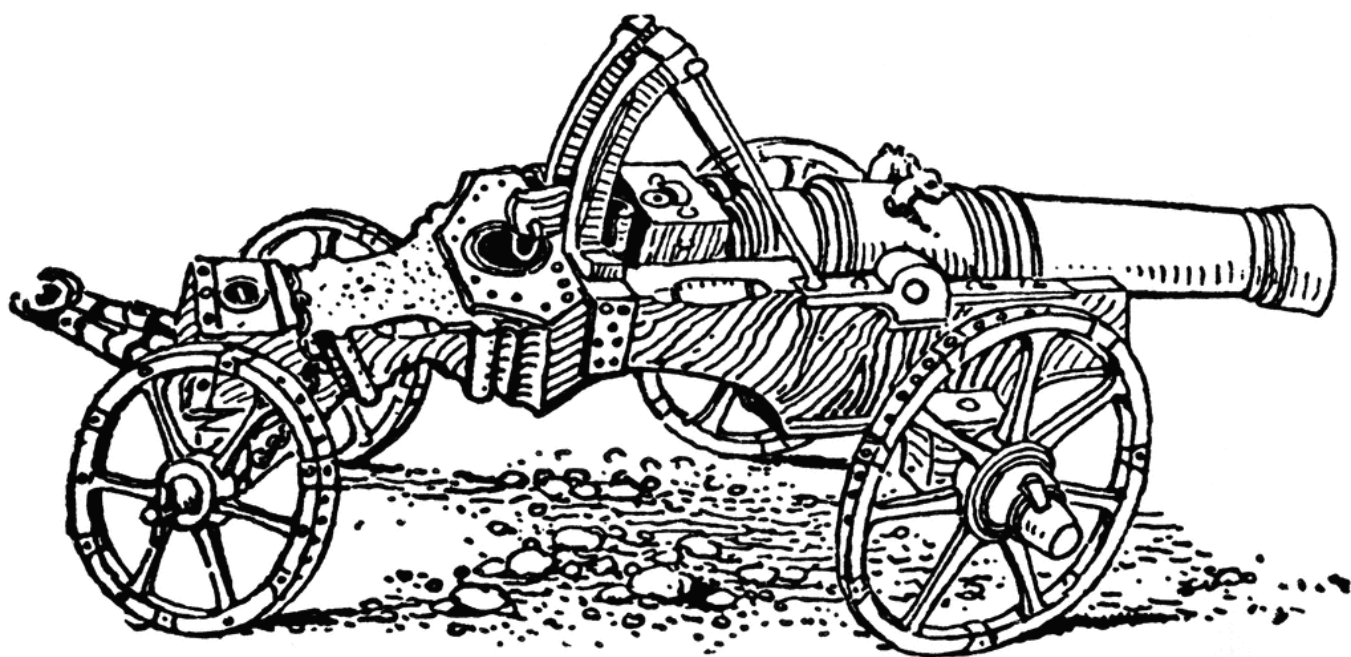
But Mr Arsehole had been out of the picture. There was no one around who could pull something like that off, or at least, no one with motivation.

Then it clicked. He was a sore loser. A sore loser, with connections to big corporations, who have a reputation for owning

things they shouldn't.

Wow.

One of them must have some kind of hidden gauss cannon or something, and he'd called in a favour. I wondered how accurate something like that would be. Fairly, I supposed, past experience said maybe down to tens of metres or so. He'd asked them to shoot at a built-up area with a heavy weapon, with no guarantee it wouldn't miss? Weren't we supposed to be the bad guys?



We pulled together Locomotive Hazard's spare parts so we had something for our appointment the next day. It wasn't great - they were meant to be spare parts, not a whole spare robot - but having said we'd be there, I wasn't going to be the Leopard Who Cried Wolf. We were pretty sure it was a foregone conclusion, given how things had gone the day before. With no other choice, we half-heartedly titled our jerry-rigged knockoff 'Heavy Messing' and got on with it. There wasn't much reason for me to be there, so I just watched the whole thing on TV.

Without the high tech bits to build another shield, we were left with a big empty space. Given that we weren't likely to be getting this one back, we decided to fill the space with presents. A present; it turned out to be bigger than anticipated.

As predicted, the Vigilante showed up minutes after we did.

Heavy Messing had just finished a lap of the office's foyer, having already smashed its way through the empty reception.

Without the shield, the fight was short and tedious. Whoever was in control of Messing got a couple of impressively nimble shots in with its legs, but apparently that black suit was covering some kind of exoskeleton. Every time one of the colossal legs smashed into him, the Vigilante just went rigid and slid sideways a way. After a couple of goes he started getting wise to the routine, and after that it was like they were trying to kick a fly. He was always somewhere else by the time the big metal foot arrived. Then he got his energy blaster thing out, and covered the floor with robot bits.

Minutes after it had started, the fight was done. There was a resounding explosion as the present went off and removed most of the lower floors of the building. It turned out that Mr Arsehole was also basically explosion proof, which was immensely disappointing.

He arrived for an interview with the news reporter some minutes later. "This was an act carried out by a few dangerous terrorists who care for nothing but destruction," he said. "Nothing can be gained by their actions, which have caused billions in property damage."

I love the way he clearly didn't care if anyone was hurt.

"We know their location. They will be brought to justice."

Justice... A court date, a jury of my peers? Yeah, I doubted it. At least I knew who'd tracked Gena now.

And anyway, I had a hidden ace up my s— in my jacket. I poked Eileen's number into an intercom panel.

"Hmm?" she said, as the line connected.

"Hi Eileen, I assume you've heard the news by now. Can Project Mu hit a small slow-moving target if we know roughly where it'll be before hand?"

There were a few seconds of rapid typing. "Mmmm," she said a little uncertainly, "yeah? Yeah. Probably."

I took a moment to force some gravitas into my voice,  
“Activate... Project Mu.”

“O-ho-ho!” said Eileen, and ended the call.

Project Mu was part of our space program, and also a side gig selling motivational posters to local architects. What the architects didn’t know, was that the flashy graphic art they were buying was actually just a carrier for a stream of subliminal messages.

‘Raise this elevation.’

‘Make that bit curvier.’

‘More glass! Endless walls of glass!’

That kind of thing. My favourite was a cartoon of a wooden horse on holiday with a funny caption underneath.

The space part was a constellation of orbiting satellites. Someone else’s satellites, naturally, thanks to our local hacker. With the architect’s help, tens of glossy, curvy, fashionable offices would be sat beneath, their sweeping glass surfaces quietly reflecting the sunshine. Up to the satellites. On a whim, or a command from a masked source, they could bounce and focus the light back down anywhere within a hundred miles. We were pretty sure it would be the world’s first doomsday laser powered entirely by renewable solar energy. Not that anyone would care when they being melted by a beam of fire that had just appeared out of the sky.

Basically, I wasn’t the only one who’d really wanted an orbital death laser. It was just that we thought someone might notice if we chucked one up there ourselves.

Back on the screen, the reporter was in the middle of handing back to the news desk when the Vigilante cut them off. “One last thing,” he said, “a message to the terrorists.”

Wasn’t ‘I know where you live’ enough?

“We know about the architects. And we made sure they knew exactly who they were buying from.” He unclipped his lapel mic,

handed it to someone off camera, and walked away.

Well, there went my ace. Uh... never mind, I guess?



The air in the little underground kitchen was tense, and there wasn't much of it left with so many of us crammed in there. I pulled my front half up onto the table and waved everyone into silence.

“Ok, listen up people! This is it, things are serious now. The Vigilante will be here soon, and it looks like the corporates are bussing in some help.” Looking around the room at the drawn faces didn't make me feel any better, but it seems to be what people do in films. “We're tinkerers, hackers, weavers of mischief. Against all the odds, we've pulled through obstacle after obstacle. We will never be silenced while there is work to do! We aren't soldiers, and we don't have weapons to fight. But,” there was absolute silence around me, “sorry, no rousing speech, we're toast.”

Several people suddenly looked very disappointed. A canid-looking person in the back said what I guess a lot of people were thinking, “But aren't we the evil horde or whatever? Can't we just doomsday weapon 'em or sommet?” The room at large mumbled a general ‘what they said’, and I had to raise my voice to be heard.

“That was the general idea, yes, but Project Mu is compromised. We've just lost our only viable combat robots. I'm really sorry, we just don't have anything good left right now. We have to evacuate while we still can.” I had to swallow to clear my throat. “I'll stay here and keep them busy. It's probably me they'll really want, anyway.”

Alissa's voice cut through the noise, “no can do boss.”

Congleton shouldered his way out beside her and nodded grimly. “The whole heroic sacrifice thing is a cop-out, and you

know it.” A few other voices added their own assent.

What do you even say to that?

“Uh, what do you have in mind?” was the best I could think of. The conversation spent quite a while going in circles from there, but we did ultimately agree on a plan.



Most of us ended up allocated to covering groups as they evacuated. Someone still had to cause some kind of hold up to buy time, and that wasn't a job I was ok leaving to anyone else. After some arguing, it was agreed that I'd go with Alissa, Congleton, and whatever help the engineers could cook up at short notice.

We scrounged up what we could in the way of weapons and PPE - sorry, elbow pads and hard hats just aren't 'armour' - and set about barricading the underground entrance to the lair. Part way through panting and sweating a steel blast shield into position, some of the engineering crew appeared, laden with kit. We didn't have time to be back seat mad-scientists, so we went on with our hauling. When they left we were not a little unnerved by the two huge monolithic cylinders they'd assembled some way beyond our barricade.

On investigation, I found that each had a metal shell, and was actually a main body sat atop a separate pedestal. Alissa appeared next to me, but the thing still dwarfed even her imposing six feet two. We walked round to the front of one of the mighty pillars, and found a gun barrel just below a single glaring red eye. Alissa gave the thing a kick. It made a dull thud, but didn't budge, or even so much as wobble.

I gave her a look, “You sure you want to do that? Those guns look... kinda hefty.”

“It's just a hunk of metal,” she said, shrugging, and walked



away.

With a startling lack of sound, the whole pillar spun slowly, it's glowing eye following her malevolently.

"Sorry," I whispered to it, and the next time I looked it was back to staring out into the empty tunnel. We went back to huddling behind our barricade.

From outside, we could hear increasingly alarming noises. I shuffled my equipment to a more comfortable position, and the magazine fell to the floor with a heavy thunk.

Alissa looked at me sideways, "You sure that thing is worth the time of day?"

"Mmph-mm-m-rgh!" I said through a mouthful of explosives, doing my best to shove the ammunition back in.

There was a loud explosion from outside, and the floor shook. Alissa and Congleton looked around nervously as the corridor filled with dust. A second later, there was a much louder explosion from somewhere nearby. That was followed by the sound of falling metal, and a shaft of sunlight lanced through the wall and ceiling twenty metres ahead of us. The crunch of boots echoed back and forth from the concrete walls. A squad of five people in obviously very expensive armour clambered in through the hole.

There was a moment's silence, a sharp click from a trigger or a safety catch, and then utter chaos as the space filled with incoming fire. Our gun turrets returned the barrage in kind, their bullets passing a colourful fan of laser fire coming the other way.

Energy pulses zinged off of the casings of both turrets, spraying nearby walls with burnt gouges. A corporate soldier fell in the hail of flying metal. Another of the lackeys who'd been lagging behind appeared, hefting a different type of weapon. There was terrific flash as they fired - some sort of anti-vehicle device I guessed - and one of the turrets dissolved into glowing shrapnel.

I missed what happened next because I was ducking.

When I could see again another soldier was on the floor. Our remaining foes focused their assault on the one turret still standing, as Alissa and Congleton brought their own weapons into position. The roaring barrage continued in both directions for a moment, and then there was a sharp crack, and the second pillar stilled.

“It’s down to us,” Congleton shouted over the ongoing din.

The corporates moved up slowly, blanketing our improvised barricade with laser fire. Our hiding spot slowly filled with the clicks and plinks of hot metal. I hauled my weapon up to a slot in the barricade by its rubber handle, but a plate to my right suddenly glowed with heat and my grip faltered. The bi-pod fell sideways.

Alissa steadied her far more practical rail-rifle, targeting screen glowing faintly as she lined up. Her finger flexed and there was a sound like a power station blowing a fuse. The air tasted of metal. Looking carefully through my slot I could see another techno-lackey who wouldn’t be getting up again. People generally don’t when they have holes big enough to see through.

On my other side, the many barrels of Congleton’s antique gatling gun were slung awkwardly over the top of our metal shield. This made aiming without getting hit himself basically impossible, but he didn’t seem particularly concerned. The barrels spun into a blur, he pulled the trigger, and a stream of ordinance plinked and sang in all directions. One of the corporates got unlucky, and momentarily caught Congleton’s bullet hose across their chest.

They looked down, surprised, and the three of us watched as bullet after bullet thunked to a stop against the fancy armour, before tumbling uselessly to the floor. The solder looked back to us and hefted their gun in Congleton’s direction. I went back to trying to right my own clumsy setup.

Alissa’s screen was busy again, but it looked like she was having trouble getting a clean shot past fallen debris. She shifted her weight to the side and strained to get the gun into a viable position, but an incoming beam sliced through a gap in her cover and threw her against the side wall.

If I went to help my bi-pod would fall over again, and there wasn't much help I could give anyway.

Congleton also saw what had happened, and with a grunt and an almost super-human heave he dragged his ancient weapon to chest height. He dived heavily across the width of the barricade, loosing an almost solid curtain of lead as he went. A flash of miniature lightning flickered around one of the corporates' waists, and something in their armour let out a sad little trail of smoke. They looked surprised for a moment, and then Congleton's army of vengeful bees slammed them against a fallen slab of concrete, and proceeded to make what I will simply describe as 'a mess'. It seemed likely the failing gadgetry might have been some sort of power-pack.

There was a series of furious clicking noises from off to my side, and the firehose spluttered to a halt. Congleton had finally run out of bullets. He threw down the empty gun, and crouched next to Alissa who was looking dangerously pale.

She was huddled against the concrete, expression a silent snarl of pain, clutching her side. I waved frantically to both of them, and shouted to Congleton to take Alissa and get help. He nodded, and I saw him start to half drag, half carry her back through the door behind us. Through my crack in the barricade, I could see one remaining corporate advancing slowly.

Just me and you, matey.

Crouched in safety looking through a crack wasn't an ideal position to aim a rocket launcher from. Laser pulses were still crackling past the barricade at an alarming rate, so sticking anything over the parapet to get a better shot didn't seem like a good idea. It'd be really useful if I had Alissa's indirect aiming screen right now, but of course I'd picked the biggest, least practical weapon I could.

I heaved the thing into line with the slot in the barricade, got one paw round the tube to sort-of aim, glanced behind me to check for space, and then jammed my other front leg against the trigger lever. The magazine emptied, auto-load mechanism whining frantically, until all four micro-rockets had been fed into the weapon.

It might have been satisfying to see my opponents' startled reaction to the onslaught, or it might have been horrifying. Either way, I was too busy hiding from the ensuing deluge of splintered concrete. My ears rang all the more from the rapid series of blasts and everything shook violently. I lay on the cool floor, feeling breaths come in and go out until I could think again.

Hopefully missing wouldn't have mattered too much.

Something thunked to the ground in front of me, spun for a few seconds, and toppled to the floor. Eventually my dazed brain caught up, and assembled the shapes into the idea of a helmet, with hi-tech integrated goggles. I pulled myself up the barricade to see what I'd done.

All that was left in the shattered remains of the lair's entrance was a single solitary boot. It was smoking gently.

Was that it? Was there just the Vigilante left now?

Unfortunately, blowing things up in underground tunnels is a bad idea, and the door back into the lair was now blocked by a chunk of concrete larger than I was. I made for the hole the corporates had come in through instead, deciding someone ought to find their boss and file a complaint. Shame my rocket launcher was empty, it would have been perfect.

On my way out, I had jump over the body of the unfortunate whose armour had given out and let Congleton's antique eat them. They had apparently been scrabbling at the case of the power-pack - or whatever it was - in their last moments. A cover was open, and something was clutched in their glove. I nosed the fist open, carefully.

Inside was a mangled piece of paper, probably cheap office paper by the look of it. On it was written, in ornate handwriting, 'thought you might need a hand with these daft buggers, this was the best I could do.' It was signed 'J F' in the same over-wrought handwriting. So that's where they'd got to. Maybe we really were friends after all.



Outside, everything was quiet. And also mostly flat, which is not the best look for a chemical processing plant. Options for hiding were fairly limited, so I made for the nearest piece of wall that was still at all wall-shaped. Unfortunately, someone else had had the same idea. Behind the wall, I found the Vigilante, and another five corporate super-soldiers.

“Uh, hi?” I hazarded, and frantically looked for something to dive under.

The Vigilante said nothing. The corporates formed up behind him, weapons readied, as the Vigilante’s arm cannon started to whine threateningly.

“Maria... Smith. You stand accused of conspiracy to steal state secrets, breach of the peace, grand arson, littering, and theft of one of Her Majesty’s swans.”

I was glad they remembered that one, very tasty, holiday in London.

He continued, “Under the dangerous animals act, you are hereby sentenced to summary execution.” He raised his arm.

I was out of options. Outnumbered. Very very outgunned. Trying to maul the smug bastard was tempting, but I was pretty sure I’d be shot to ribbons before I could cover the gap. I stared out across the city’s jagged skyline, and did my best to enjoy the late afternoon sunshine.

There was a glorious blue sky, which might have been nice in other circumstances. In the distance, expensive office buildings glittered in the light, and behind them I could just make out the squat shape of the medical building and storage facility. Something high in the sky twinkled.

I wondered if it had been worth it. What if I’d just gone all in on the evil thing, blown stuff up with abandon, ignored who ended up being collateral damage? What if I’d just settled for... whatever it is other people do? Stayed as was, done my best to hide everything behind a mask of tedious normality, turned a blind eye to the things going wrong in the world.

Ah, fuck it. No, I’d do it again, even if I had a choice.

“So dies the inhuman monster, and another obstacle to true progress,” the Vigilante intoned under his breath. The electric whine rose in pitch. I dug my claws into the dust and shut my eyes.

There was a flash so bright it dazzled, even with my eyes tight shut. A wave of intense heat hit me and I smelled burning fur. The sound was so loud I couldn’t hear it.

Well, it had been a good run.



Was that it then? I opened my eyes.

Death was turning out to be somewhat anti-climactic. I’d been ready to cease to exist. Or wind up in the middle of a vast black desert beneath a starry sky. There was a huge bubbling pit of glowing liquid, a good deal of heat, and some bits of the floor that shone a deep red. But it was all just parked in the wreck of a devastated industrial building, and smelled of hot concrete.

Budget cutbacks must have hit the seventh circle hard. How disappointing.

Something clanged open behind me, and I jumped, half a meter vertically. A head appeared through the metal hatch. The demon from the depths flashed me a toothy grin and said, “did you enjoy the show, then?”

I dug around in my head for words. “W— H— What?” I said.

“The show! The big blammo! Mew! The big mew!”

“Meow?” I ventured.

The demon’s ears flattened in disappointment. “You missed it? How on Earth could you possibly miss it!”



Some part of me caught up with reality. “Uh, Eileen, are we dead? Why are you making cat noises at me?”

She tilted her head at me. “Project Mu! It worked! It didn’t even miss!”

I glanced back at the pool of molten concrete, and my brain fit the pieces back together. “Wow.” I said, flatly, “You melted the Vigilante and his lackeys.” After some thought I added, “Nice timing.”

Eventually I remembered something else, “You were supposed to evacuate.”

“Oh? Was I?” said Eileen distantly, “Didn’t hear the alarm.”

I gave her my best incredulous look, “How?”

She shrugged. “Dunno. Music was pretty loud? Have you listened to Black Dre—”

I saw a tangent coming, and cut in, “Can I come inside? I’m shaking all over.” She waved me down into the bunker.



Later, when the sun had set, we found some candles and set them out as a circle in the ruins of the lair. The surface buildings were flattened, and there was a massive hole which cut right down through the core of the underground section. Everything was open to the elements, and anyone who happened to want to could come and look, so it wasn’t much use as a secret underground lair anymore.

Eileen and I had found Alissa and Congleton with what had been our on-site medical team. Alissa was looking rough, but seemed quite healthy for someone who’d recently been shot. A few people, Congleton included, liked the idea of a candle-lit vigil for the passing of the era, and agreed to join Eileen and I on the surface.

It wasn't much, but it felt fitting. Say goodbye to things now passed, but also welcome a new future. "To deny the end is to deny all beginnings," someone once said.

No doubt the corporations would herald their terrific victory. Terrorists vanquished, secret underground lair destroyed, threat neutralised. What they'd leave out, deliberately or not, was that the important part had survived.

Nearly everyone had made it out, albeit with assorted cuts, bruises, and so on. It wasn't the building, the tools, or the fancy technology that really mattered. It was the people. And they were still here, and still had a will to make the world a better place.

As the moon rose, I decided I needed to stretch my legs. I danced myself dizzy through the ash, spinning around the circle until I fell over. Nearby, the lights of Eileen's bunker glowed faintly, and I could hear her keyboard clattering distantly. Probably she was already scripting a better future, mumbling some of the words aloud as she went. I sauntered over and stuck my head down the hatch. "So what did happen with Project Mu? Everyone thought it was done for."

I lowered myself into the bunker carefully while Eileen spun her chair round. Her tail flicked distractedly.

"Oh that. Actually, I just picked up a weird email about it. It was sent to the address for the shell company we were using to sell posters and stuff, but addressed to you by name. It didn't say much, just 'thanks for the posters, we think they're pretty cool' and an attachment that looks like part of the plan for an office building. Part of it's circled in red, with a correction. Then it's just signed with a whole list of names, like they'd gone round a few offices getting signatures from random people at their desks."

Chewing my tail thoughtfully just filled my mouth with the taste of concrete, so it wasn't as reassuring as usual. "Wewwuwd," I said, indistinctly, spat my tail out, and tried again. "Weird. Thoughts?"

Eileen shrugged, "I guess they like what we do."

# pore

By Gaast

CW: body horror, violence, blood, animal death, and implied character death

Whatever it was, it's dead now. Its stinking corpse lies torn open by whatever killed it. I devour the remaining meat, the stench of rot filling my nostrils. With each bite I swallow, I feel the warm sensation of becoming one with this decaying thing, like I'm wrapping myself around it and making it a part of me.

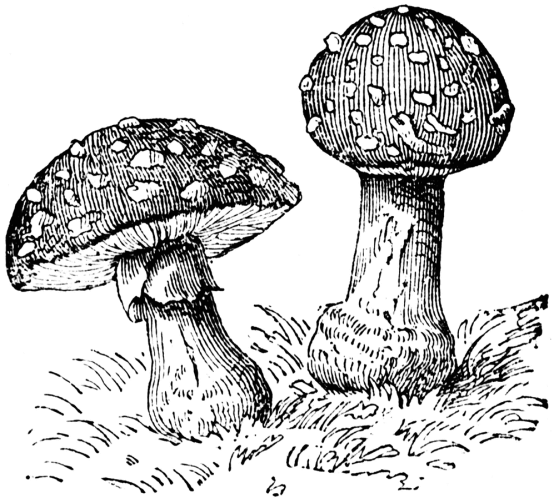
A familiar sensation scours my back. The thick scars that line it where my fur is thin bubble over with new pain. In a few days they'll open, portals once more to my insides, and everything crawling within.

For now, I climb back into the trees, searching for anything else left dead on the forest floor. I can't stray too far from my cave, now; at any moment I need to be ready to harvest my crops, to store them away, to clean my wounds.

Each carcass calls to me with its smell, and when I approach, they seem to quiver, I think with joy. As I eat their quivers seep through me, straight to my spine. The gripping thing coiled around my bones pulses; the pains pushing against my flesh throb. They're growing inside of me, I know, and I give them nourishment. They spill from my spine to my lungs to my brain, their fingers sunk into every crevice.

So of course I eat. I do it for them.





When enough time passes the pain reaches a crescendo and blood pours from my back. The mushrooms are finally sprouting. I head to the pond so I can look at them, get an early glimpse at how they look. Though they shimmer in the water, they're coming in red, thick, wide. My expression does not change.

I can spend hours staring at new growths this way, but now is when they need me the most. I climb back into the trees and search for more food, sniffing the air all the more ravenously. Maybe I'll find something to eat that will make something terrifying of them.

Later, when I curl up to sleep on my cave floor, I do so ensconced by all the mushrooms I carefully harvested from my body. Bending my spine this way makes the fingers inside me creak and moan, and the pains in my back grow sharp, but I don't have room to stretch out. The mushrooms' smells blend into something pleasant, familiar, cloying. Inside each one is a feeling, a memory, a record of who we were and what we experienced when we grew together.

They'll tell me when they're ready. In the morning, I look at them again in the pond, delighted to see stalks peeking up from my flesh. I dip myself into the water and rub at the blood caking my fur.

The woods teem with life, and so much of it bares its fangs and claws at me. I keep to the trees, darting across branches, staying away from anything that could hunt me down. Sometimes, I hear their growls; they try to corner me as I eat, groups of them

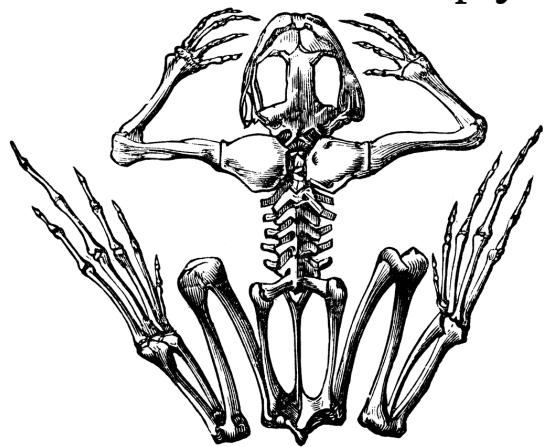


surrounding me, gnashing at me, looking for the opening that will let them spill me out onto the dirt. But I'm more desperate than they are, no matter how they starve. I can overpower cougars, outrun bears. I can leap into the canopy, wind my way around the branches. The fingers in me creak and moan but they relent and let me dash away, even if it means letting something rot to nothing in the brush.

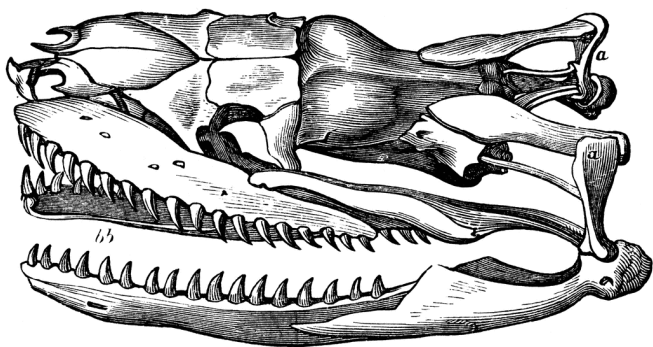
When I'm safe, before my breath has settled, I run a claw along my back, feeling the caps and stalks for any loss or damage. I can't relax until I know each mushroom is safe.

Sometimes, up there, I notice some creature prowling down below, looking for something to kill. I'll follow it quietly, watching its movements. I can tell by their noses, their postures, their movements that they're hungry, that if they don't eat something soon they might never have the energy to hunt again. I admire their muscles, the swiftness of their claws. My body is almost languid in comparison, even when I'm so hungry I can barely think. Their senses sharpen when their stomachs empty.

Eventually, they track down something, pounce on it, tear it open, consume its flesh. Sometimes its kin join it, leaving behind bones. But there's always something left to eat, wrapped tightly around the corpse's core. I gnaw it off, break the bones, drink the marrow.

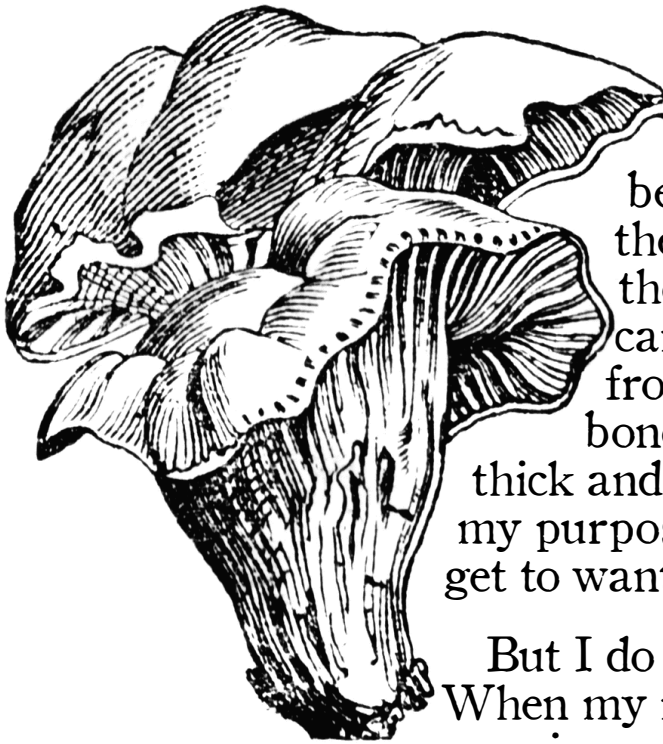


They're all stronger than I am, but I have something they don't, something that drives me harder than death.



In a few days, my latest crop will finish growing. I check them multiple times each day in reflections and with my claws. I tell myself I do this to make sure they're healthy, but I know better. I want them to stop

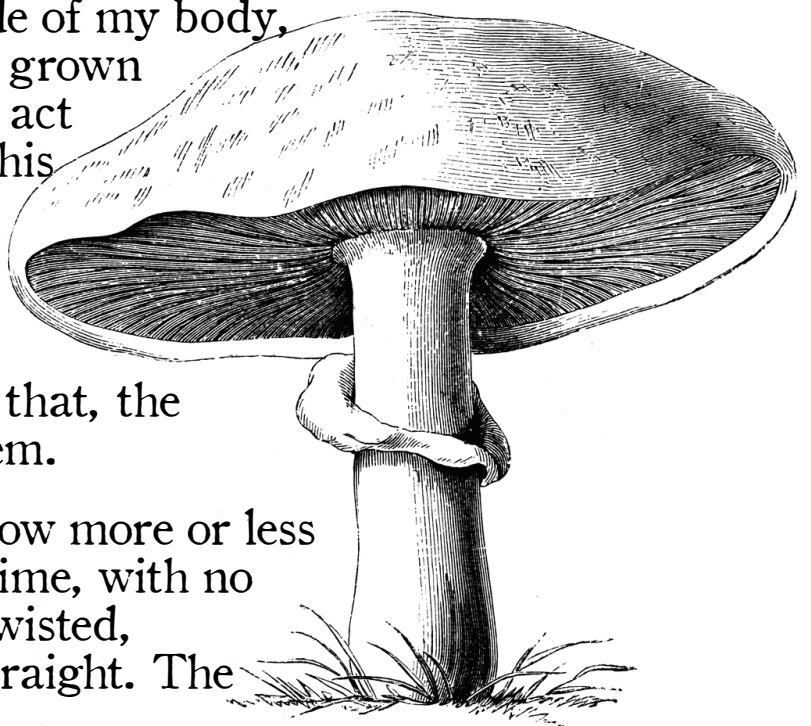
looking the way they do, want them to stink and twist and hurt me in every way they can. My insides burn.



What I am is their soil. I don't get to say what they become or how they become it—I don't get to want them to be anything. My place is to make them grow, and no matter how they do it, I will grow them. They can drain every drop of blood from me, eat all the meat off my bones, and grow dull and pale and thick and straight, and that is my role, my purpose. They give me that, so I don't get to want them to be different.

But I do want them to be different. When my mushrooms first started growing, each crop felt new and wild, with colors I couldn't imagine and shapes I could hardly understand. When I ate them, I'd experience sensations so foreign to me I thought my mind would break down completely. They rewired my body and my brain. My thinking grew more complex, and my emotions more stable. They supplanted my nerves inside me and took over what processes they needed. I grew more, ate more, and found myself less startled by the feelings they evoked, less estranged from the memories they contained. I would eat them and see myself, my actions, my thoughts, my feelings, as though hovering just outside of my body, and by studying myself I'd grown far too familiar with how I act and how I feel—after all, this was what made this cap type or that, long stalks or thin, bold colors or dull. My life served as their soil, and the more I understood that, the more of myself I saw in them.

And so it stopped. I'd grow more or less the same mushroom each time, with no variety crop to crop. The twisted, unthinkable shapes grew straight. The





violent, unnatural colors dulled. The smells ceased completely. Eating them would fill me with a sense of nostalgia, and I'd get almost nothing from their memories. Instead of losing myself in the rapture of eating them, or displaying them reverently in my cave—I stored them where I could, watching desperately as they outgrew the space. I slip among them uneasily. None of them are right. No, they should be better, more complex, more interesting.

But none of that comes to mind when something backs me against a tree. No matter what tries to sink its fangs into my body, I can think of the fingers writhing inside me and overcome it. Everything else in the forest wanders from meal to meal, beholden to their stomachs. Something else animates me. So I've jumped on their backs, pulled their jaws apart. I've clawed out their eyes, shattered their teeth. If I must, I can stop their claws into splinters, or cut their bellies open. The closer my fruits are to harvest, the more violently I react.

I fight, then run to my cave. I lie down, panting, shaking, surrounded by mushrooms. I squeeze my eyes shut, curling up, sticky with blood. They died for a reason. Those creatures got to die for a reason. Everything I eat serves a purpose.

But eventually even the stink of blood subsides and all I smell is sweet fungus.

It isn't long before my latest crop finishes growing. I've monitored its progress in reflections, cleaning blood and scabs, feeding them whatever bodies came my way. And now they're ready.

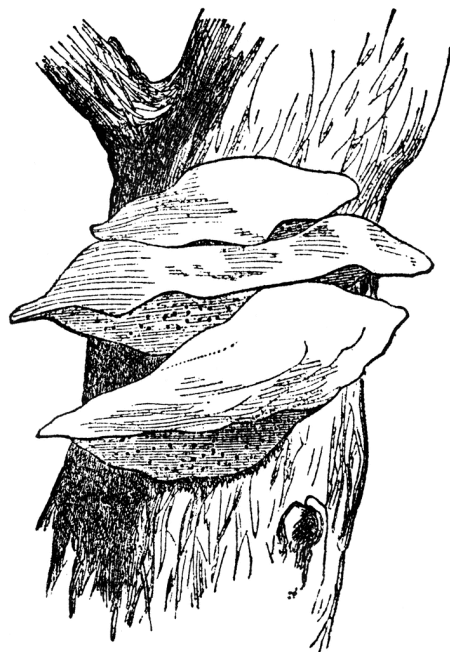


Rising a few inches off my back is a dense thicket of red-capped mushrooms. Their pale stalks are thick, thick enough to support the wide caps at their tips. They're stout, solid. I don't think they have a smell, and their colors are okay. Nothing I haven't seen before.

I feel as though I'm cooling the warm water. An icy sensation shivers through me. I'm sick of this feeling. I've experienced it more than I care to admit, looking at the mushrooms in my back.

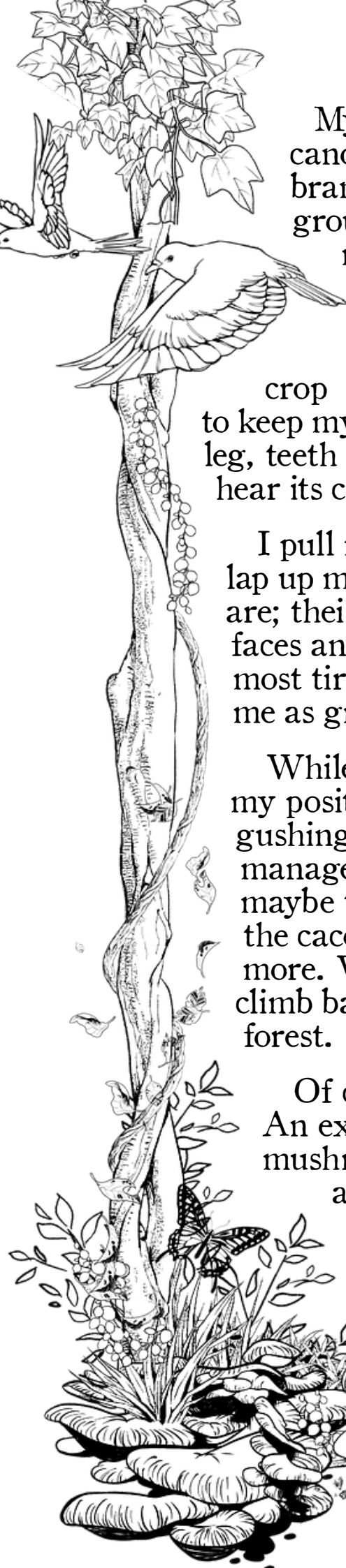
Swallowing my doubts, I carefully pluck each fruit, applying as little pressure as I can through my claws. I arrange the specimens carefully on the ground, side by side, taking stock of the variations between them. Yet, even now, looking at them directly, that cold sensation fills me. I squeeze my eyes shut. I don't have a right to judge my fruits, even if I think they've grown stale and boring, even if I know the memories and feelings they hold are trite. I'm here to produce them and no more. I shouldn't allow myself to want them to be anything at all.

My breath catches in my throat.



They're near. They smelled my blood and tracked me down. I gather the mushrooms and leap into the trees.

Below me, fanged things snarl. They claw their way into the trees. They just want me—they just want my body to nourish them. They don't care about the mushrooms. But I have to protect them. It's my life that feeds the fruits, mine and only mine. If I let myself die, no more will grow.



My arms full of fruit, I can't move through the canopy as quickly. I struggle my way through the branches, hungry growls following me both on the ground and just behind me. I head towards a nearby spot where the trees grow less densely, hoping to use my legs to put some distance between me and my pursuers, but I lose my balance on a weak branch, scattering the crop to the ground as I struggle to catch a limb to keep myself off the ground. A sharp pain sears my leg, teeth sinking deep into it; I kick the beast until I hear its cartilage burst and it yelps and darts away.

I pull myself back into the branches as the creatures lap up my blood from the dirt. I don't know what they are; their mottled fur resembles mine, but their doglike faces and thick, catlike paws do not. These are my most tireless enemies. Nothing else in the forest hunts me as greedily.

While they drink, I have a few moments to consider my position. I can't get far on my leg, and the blood gushing from it will lead them to whatever shelter I'd manage to find. I could fight off one of them, or maybe two, but not this many—I've counted six, and the cacophony around me tells me there's probably more. When they're finished with my blood they'll climb back into the trees to spill me completely into the forest.

Of course my thoughts turn to the mushrooms. An experience like this will surely grow from me mushrooms like those I produced long ago, twisted and strange. If I could feel them deep below the wounds on my back, I'm sure they'd be writhing in their alien joy. These are new, powerful. The fear sucking me inward, the coldness of

my extremities, the sight of these creatures near-reverently consuming me. Even the pain in my leg, and the blood pouring from it. All of this, new soil for them to grow in.

My place is to bring the mushrooms into the world. I shouldn't care beyond that, but I do. I want them to be wonderful, monstrous, wrong, violent. Whatever was in me that made them so must now be gone.

They're circling the tree now, and I can hear claws digging into the bark. The only way I can move is down.

So I go. I lower myself into their mouths and they tear me open. My body convulses with pain and the force of their bites, their snarls filling my ears and my stench filling my nose. They dig into my back, devouring everything they can reach—even the fingers the mushrooms planted inside of me.

Good. As everything empties from me, I spend my final thoughts on the mushrooms. Deep inside what's left of me, I'm certain they'll take root in these creatures and grow horrible and nasty and new.





# et Another Unfortunate Isekai

By The Dragonheart Collective

She is born in the spring, and named Maria. On her third birthday she Awakens a transmigrated spirit.

“Oh come on,” She says with a scowl at the ground, “Not this again.”

She Knows the way she knows how to breathe and blink that she has lived before- not just once, but twice.

The full remembering is earlier this time, she Knows. Much earlier, and much more complete. Less like the fragmented dream of her first life, and more like it happened last week.

She clenches her terribly human hands. Her previous life was just fine until a car accident landed her here. In some presumably medieval fantasy world with elves and wizards.

She had a community of people like her, and now shes in a place without the miracle of hot showers! She had to go through being a teenager again. Ugh.

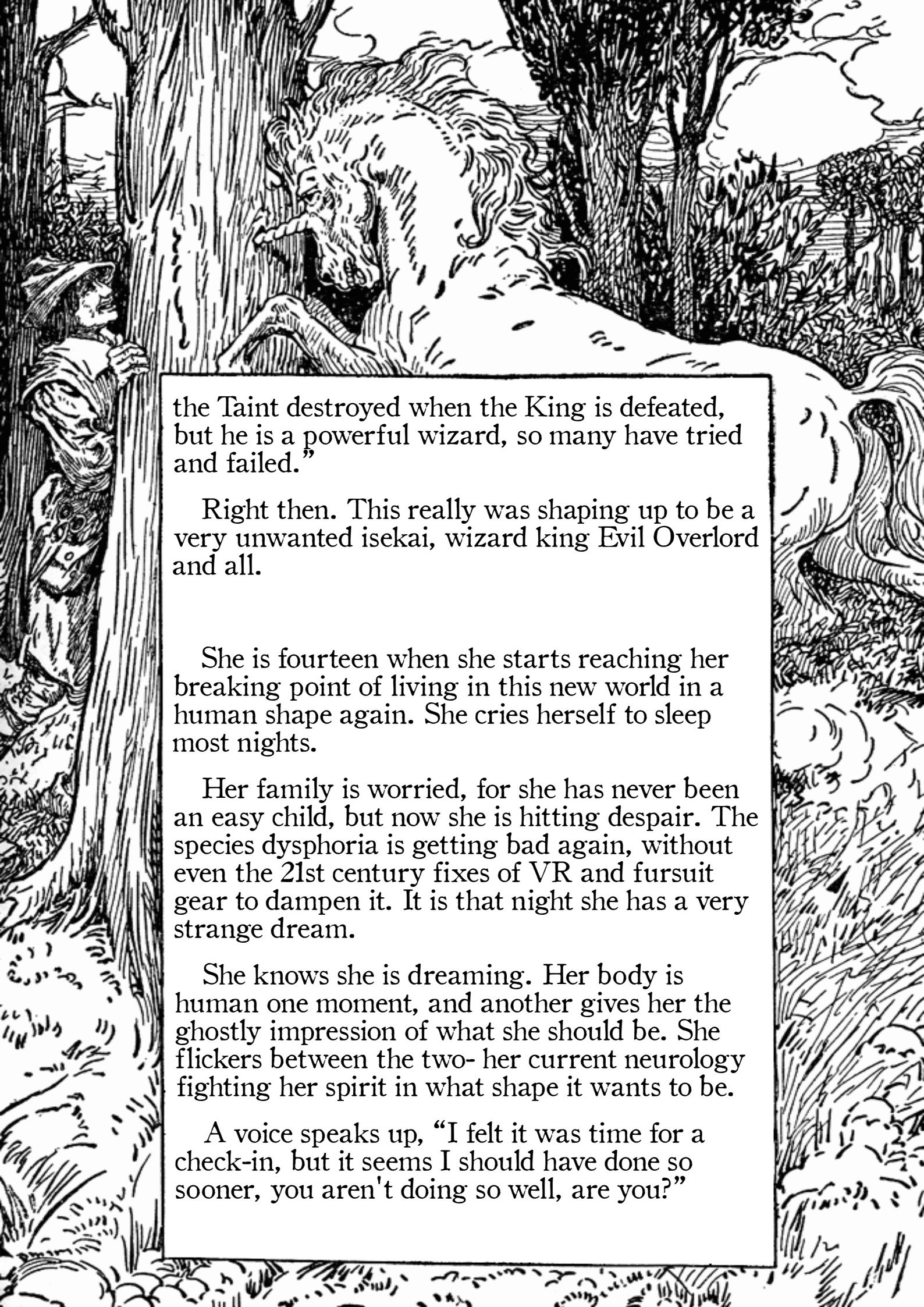
“Well, I'm a unicorn cursed into human shape,” she declares when she is eight to the elven lady named Shael who asked why she wants to learn about when unicorns still walked the land.

Shael hums and squints at her before nodding, “Alright, young unicorn. Fair enough.”

Maria blinked at the easy acceptance and settled down to listen.

“Before The Corrupted King invited the Taint fully into the world and sealed the unicorns that could purify it away, unicorns walked the world healing the sick and injured wherever they went. It is said the unicorns will be freed and





the Taint destroyed when the King is defeated, but he is a powerful wizard, so many have tried and failed.”

Right then. This really was shaping up to be a very unwanted isekai, wizard king Evil Overlord and all.

She is fourteen when she starts reaching her breaking point of living in this new world in a human shape again. She cries herself to sleep most nights.

Her family is worried, for she has never been an easy child, but now she is hitting despair. The species dysphoria is getting bad again, without even the 21st century fixes of VR and fursuit gear to dampen it. It is that night she has a very strange dream.

She knows she is dreaming. Her body is human one moment, and another gives her the ghostly impression of what she should be. She flickers between the two- her current neurology fighting her spirit in what shape it wants to be.

A voice speaks up, “I felt it was time for a check-in, but it seems I should have done so sooner, you aren't doing so well, are you?”



Maria whips around, a woman has appeared. She is tall, glowing, and very clearly not human at all. Her legs are like that of an ungulate with cloven hooves. A long tufted tail sways behind her and she has a horn upon her forehead.

She smiles and says, “I am Qrosoi, the Goddess of Purification. I am the one who transmigrated you here.”

Maria ducks her head like she still has a horn to threaten with.

“You did this,” She hisses.

“Ah,” Qrosoi says as her tail stops moving for a moment, “I really should have gotten here sooner. Before you get too heated, I must explain.”

“I'm listening,” Maria said with the tone of someone who was one poor sentence away from starting a fistfight with a god.

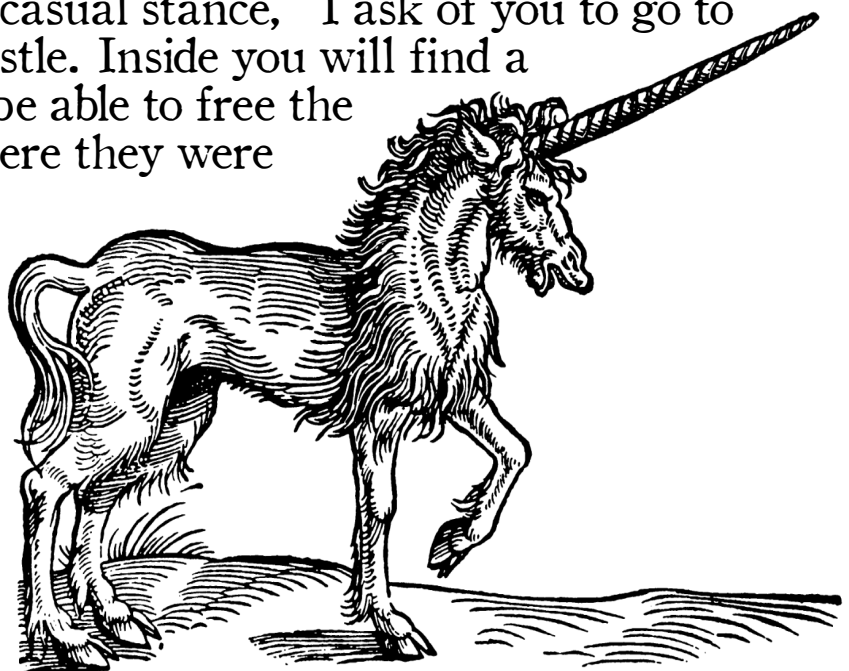
Qrosoi begins, “My primary servants are unicorns. When they were locked away, I could no longer effect the mortal plane by acting through them. The Taint runs rampant- as unicorns are what cleanse it and there are none to do so.”

She gestures in Maria's direction, “So I looked beyond my world, and there you were. A unicorn in body was no option, but a unicorn's soul is enough of a unicorn to work, and for me to act. A loophole.”

Qrosoi shifts to a less casual stance, “I ask of you to go to the Corrupted King's castle. Inside you will find a barrier. There you will be able to free the other Unicorns from where they were sealed.”

“To sweeten the pot,” Qrosoi continues, “I will return you to your true shape if you succeed.”

Qrosoi has Maria's attention now.



Maria crosses her arms, “That's a lot of dangerous work beforehand, how do I know you will do what you promised?”

“I have a shrine halfway to the castle.” Qrosoi says smoothly, “Go there and activate it and I will be able to gift you a day in the form you ought to be, its all the power I will be able to inflict upon the world beyond appearing in your dreams right now, I am afraid. Will you accept?”

“I'm still mad.”

“I didn't expect you not to be.”

“...But I'll do it.”

“Excellent!”

Maria unceremoniously bangs her head on the headboard of her bed as she wakes up.

Right then.

Unicorn Quest.



The work to learn where the shrine is exactly is the hardest so she does that first. The castle is on top of a mountain, which is much easier. No sense going haring off without directions.

On the day she decides its time to leave, Shael comes to her.

“Thought you might be leaving.”

It's not like Maria was subtle about wanting to go to the shrine.

Maria huffs and continues to pack as she talks, “You going to tell my family?”

“I should and you should, but I'm not going to stop you.”

“Oh?”

Shael hums, “I figure this will go more smoothly if you have someone more used to travel with you, so I’ll be coming with you.”

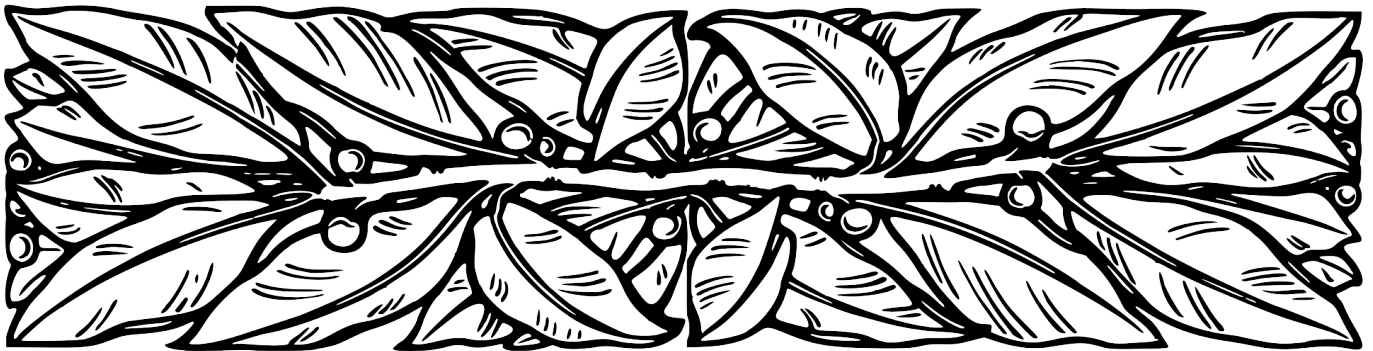
Maria looks over at her in surprise.

Shael laughs- but not in a mean way, “Little Unicorn, do you even know how to use that dagger?”

Maria scowls as she straps it to her belt.

“Maria, when we tell your parents you are leaving so you can say goodbye, having me as your chaperone will help make them more amenable to the idea, and ease their worries.”

Well fine then.



Saying goodbye wasn't as terrible as first thought. Her parents were sad, but sent her off with their blessings.

“You were going to go whether I wanted you to or not. You always were a wild thing, but I’m glad I can send you off,” her father says.

Her eyes were just stinging because of the dust in them, honest!

“I’ll come back,” She promises, and Maria finds with some surprise she actually means it.

She gives him another hug, her three siblings ruffle her hair, and off she goes.

When they arrive at the shrine Maria is so tired of barely seasoned fish she could cry.

It is at the foot of the shrine Maria decides they should set up camp for the night and look at the shrine in the morning.

Shael agrees, but asks Maria why.

Maria wanted to see if Qrosoi would give more instructions, but she hadn't actually explained the Situation yet to Shael. Now is as good a time as any, she figures.

"I had a dream," Maria says after a moment, "Not like a normal one. It felt different. I was told to come here to activate the shrine, and then go to the Castle to free the unicorns. All I'd have to do is touch a barrier holding them in. If she wasn't lying I'll get to be a proper unicorn for a day when I activate this shrine. If I finish this I get to stay that way. Sounds completely mad though, so I'll see how this goes. If it checks out then I'll do the rest."

"You've always been a strange child, Little Unicorn," Shael says after a moment of thinking, "A message from the gods would not be unheard of for one such as you. Would you know who asked?"

Maria prods the fire with a stick and replies, "Called herself Qrosoi. Looked halfway between a lady and a unicorn."

Shael nods, "And that would be why you are at her shrine. Very well then."

And that was that.



Quite early that morning, Maria steps into the stone room at the heart of the shrine. A short carved stone obelisk sits in the middle. Qrosoi had just laughed the night before in her dreams and told her to touch the 'activator'.

Maria assumed that was it.

When she touches the stone it feels warm. Then, the carvings begin to glow. With a flash, suddenly Maria's body feels warm too, and she feels it begin to change and shift.

Its a split second change, but it feels like it lasts longer as her bones rearrange. Its like stretching after sitting still for a long while as she assumes the stance that feels right, her new tail lashing. When she opens her eyes again, she a unicorn on the outside now too.

Qrosoi wasn't lying, and that was a fragile, beautiful hope. She could be what her soul begs to be.

Her legs feel right now, her vision range feels right, she has a tail! A horn!

Shael laughs in wonder, "Well done little unicorn!"

Maria trots over to her, attempting speak but realizing she can't as it comes out in neighs. She flattens her ears in annoyance.

Shael walks over,  
still smiling,  
"Something to say?"

Shael put an arm on her flank, and Maria thinks loudly while wishing Shael could hear, 'Not being able to talk is very inconvenient.'

"Indeed! But this is a fine alternative."



Maria snorts in surprise.

Well, that makes things easier, Maria supposes.

“Go play, little unicorn, I should think you'd want to enjoy your proper body while you have it.”

Maria dips her head and trots out of the shrine. Slow at first, then switching her gait to go faster and faster until she hits a full gallop.

Yes, this is what she was missing.

She slows again and circles the shrine, the burn of euphoria like feeling the sun for the first time in years. Beautiful and precious.

When she returns to the front, Shael is outside again. Maria walks over to her and nudges her with her muzzle.

'I have a question.'

“Yes?”

'Why did you believe me? You've never once told me I was wrong or silly about this.'

Shael laughs again, “I've met unicorns long ago before they were sealed away, and they always were about as grumpy as you.”

Maria whinnys in surprise and responds, 'That's it?!'

Shael, “That, and you know elves can see auras- yours never was quite shape of your body.”

Maria huffs. She did not know actually.

It was usually said that they 'see the light differently', and Maria had assumed that meant they could see Shrimp Colors.

She will just keep that fact to herself.

It is then that Maria starts to feel a strange sensation. Like an itch in her brain but in a physical location outside her body. Something that feels truly wrong in every way possible.



And its getting closer very quickly.

'Shael, I can feel something coming,' Maria says.

Shael pauses.

'It doesn't feel right-' Maria remembers what Unicorns do, 'I think its-'

There is crashing in the underbrush, and Shael unsheathes her twin short swords.

“Taint!”

When it careens into view, so does another figure with a staff.

The Taint itself is evershifting- it isn't any particular color that can be pinpointed, and it doesn't seem to be made of any real substance either- more of a tear in the fabric of the world than a living thing.

It simply looks wrong to Maria, and she is filled with a white-hot desire to rid the world of its presence.

She snorts and lowers her head.

The figure that came with the Taint cried out to Shael who had run forward, “Run, I can hold it off!”

Maria paws the ground. No way.

The Taint stabs an appendage towards Shael and she dodges it.

Brandishing their staff, the newcomer causes an appendage to draw back from them as sparks erupt from it.

A wizard, Maria notes as she charges forward.

The wizard gasps at her appearance, but Maria's attention is on her opponent.

This is something to be fixed, she Knows suddenly, like a wound in the world made into something that hunts and hurts but is not quite alive.

She is a Healing Horse, so she heals.

Killing the Taint is impossible. It can be delayed and it can be encouraged to leave to hunt elsewhere, but pieces of the Taint do not die because they were never alive in the first place.

The unicorns were an exception, people said, but technically, she didn't kill it either- she simply healed it until it ceased to be.

Magic is fueled by emotions, she knows, and it is the fierce desire to help another that wells within her alongside a force she instinctually recognizes as magic.

With a flash of golden light the hole in the world knit itself closed at her bidding.

Then it was just her, Shael, and the mystery wizard.

The stranger, still panting, drops to their knees in exhaustion. They wore multicolor robes, and their ornate staff had a glass orb in the top.

The stranger finally looked up, their startling gold eyes gazing at Maria in awe.

“A unicorn,” they say, their voice quavering.

Shael sheathes her swords again, but does not relax.

Clearly realizing the suspicion, the stranger puts up their hands, “I mean no harm, fellow travelers! I am just happy that a unicorn walks these lands once more. I am called Basil, and I am a wizard who has been searching for a way to end the nightmare that the Taint brings.”

Shael decides to return introductions, “I am Shael, and this is Maria.”

Basil finally finishes catching their breath and gets back up again, running a hand through their hair.

“As far as my research tells me,” They say, “The only thing that can kill the Taint is unicorns, and they are all sealed away- except for you,” Basil nods in Maria's direction and continues, “I want to end this all, I cannot keep letting my- The Rot King continue to do this. I ask much of you, but might you aid me in my quest?”

Maria figures they need all the help they can get, and Basil seems like decent help. Maria walks to Shael and butts her head against her to communicate, 'Hear them out?'

Shael dips her head, "Our goals are much the same, we are willing to hear you out."

Basil straightens, "Right, so I should explain further. It starts twenty years ago. I was born in the western part of the land, when the nobles of the North and West went to war."

Maria settles in to listen as they continue, "The nobles of the West conscripted many men, among them my father... And my uncle. In that war, though it only lasted a few months, the death toll was high and neither side won. Among the dead was my father. Uncle returned a changed man, angry and driven. He became a wizard when previously he had no care to use his knack for magic, and started experimenting with the Taint."

Basil rung their hands, "My mother tried to beg him to stop, to at least settle down in a nice well-paid tower job, but he refused. Not long after, he set off to the North. He massacred the people of the north without care for guilt and toppled their castle. He pulled the Taint fully through there and became the Rot King. Before, the Taint never fully manifested in roving solid bodies, it had to have an anchor."

Basil continued, "Mother grew ill soon after and passed, and having nothing else, I went to my uncle. He was... The unicorns were coming in droves to destroy the taint, but he sealed them away in some barrier. I could not bear his cruelty, so I ran when I was fourteen. I learned wizardry in hopes one day I could put an end to this, and while I feel still yet unready, I cannot run any longer. Something needs to be done."

Basil turns their gold eyes back to Maria, "You might be the only being that can put a true stop to this now so I ask, please, help me put this to rights."

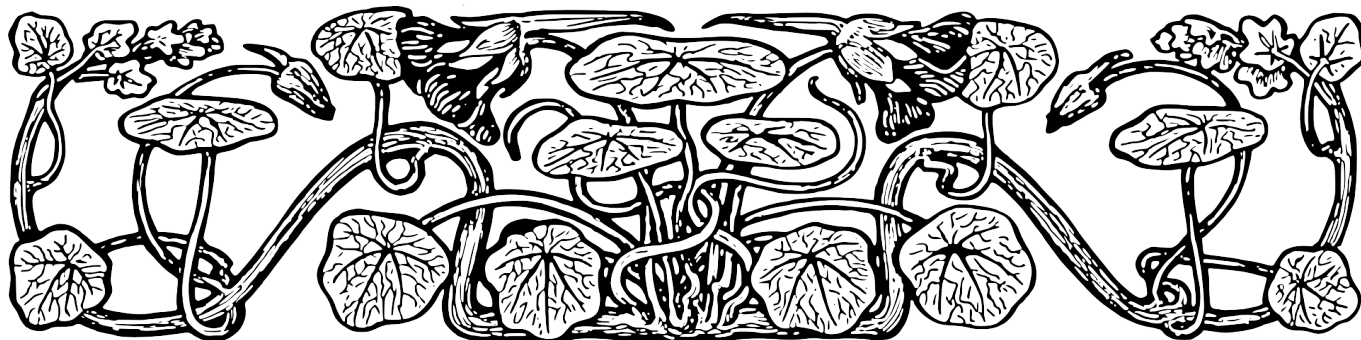
Maria neighs softly and flicks an ear. Its not Basil's fault their uncle was a jerk. They seemed alright.

Mind made up, Maria nudged Shael to message her approval

and desire to share their story too.

“Maria approves, so yes, we will aid you, though you should know our story too,” Shael says.

Glancing up at the sky to judge the time, Shael then continues, “How about we pack up our camp and fill you in.”



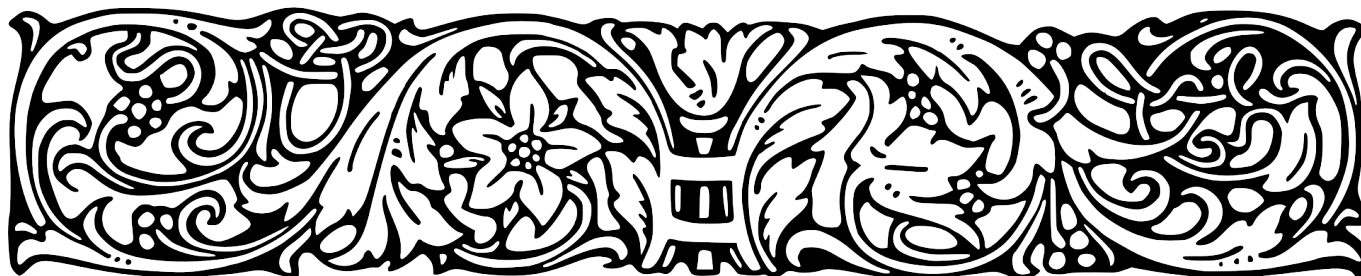
Like Shael, Basil takes Maria's story quite well. Likely because they saw her as she currently was and it made the mystical elements feel more believable, but Maria appreciates it anyway. Shael introduces herself as Maria's escort and babysitter.

Rude but fair.

As they then journey on, Maria delights herself along the way in grazing all the little plants she can find. Her tastebuds were different now, and she wants to try all the things she could like this.

The next morning, she returns to a human shape- the light flashing around her once more.

Right then, back to work.



Later, when they return to the road again, Basil asks, “Is it not strange to be in such a different form?”

“As a unicorn?” Maria replies.

Basil nods.

“No, It feels right,” Maria says, “It feels like... Like coming home. Like I'm finally as happy with how I look as I can be, with how others see me.”

Maria shoulders her pack, “It's better than this form. I was never really happy with it. It... Feels wrong to walk on two legs and flat feet and have no horn or tail. It always has. This quest gives me a chance to not feel like that anymore, how could I not?”

Basil makes an agreeing noise and runs a hand through their hair again before replying, “I can much understand that sort of sentiment. I am neither a man nor a woman and with the application of magic I can alleviate my own discomfort of that sort well enough, but you cannot for something so extreme as your species. I am glad that there is a path for you to have the body you want.”

“I do have another question, though.” Basil says.

Maria tilts her head and responds, “What?”

“How is it that unicorns kill the Taint? Do you know?”

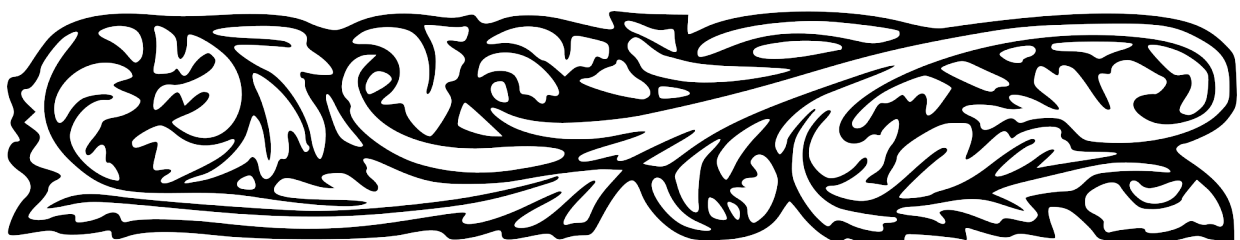
Maria shakes her head, “The Taint isn't alive, I'm not killing it. Its a wound in the world, so I'm healing it.”

Basil makes a noise of comprehension and asks again, “Whats that like?”

Maria shrugs and replies, “Whats it like for you to use magic? Its probably the same.”

Basil flicks some little lights between their hands, “Maybe...”

Shael calls to the both of them that they are falling behind, so the conversation becomes abandoned in favor of jogging to catch up.





After roughly a week of hiking, they hit the base of the mountain that the Rot King lives atop.

“We will have to be extra careful now,” Basil says, “This is where the majority of the Taint resides. We will have to be stealthy. I can work illusions for us to be better hidden from its senses, but that is not foolproof.”

Shael crosses her arms, “Lets see what you can do then.”

Basil twirls their staff, and then they mostly fade out of sight. There's a bit of visual distortion, but otherwise they have vanished from sight.

“Well?” Basil asks, sounding muffled.

Shael nods, “Quite good. It should help. Maria?”

Maria responds, “Yeah I'll take it.”



After everyone is put under the spell, they continue up the mountain. Maria having to be held back by Shael from Taint on a few occasions as she had been unprepared for the instinctual impulse to purify the Taint that persisted even in human shape.

She supposes she had a better appreciation now for the carnivorous nonhumans she knew in her previous life complaining of an overactive prey drive. She imagines that this instinct to purify was much like that.

They could not light a fire without drawing attention, so Maria supposes it was fortunate that they managed to reach the castle nearing sundown.

The castle's entry is caved in, clearly by magical means. Whole sections of the floor were blackened, gouged, and smashed. There was also more Taint roving about. It is clear that this place was once the site of a fierce battle.

Creeping through the dimly lit halls, Maria wonders how anyone could live in a place so miserable.

Basil speaks up again when they are in front of some very ornate doors. These ones were intact.

“This is the place. Let me handle my uncle, just get to the barrier, alright Maria?”

Maria murmurs her agreement. That was as good as a plan as any.

Basil then removes the illusion from only themselves- taking a deep breath to steel themselves for what comes next. They then turn to open the door.

Showtime.



This room, unlike the others, is lit. Part of it is the green fire on the torches around the room, but part of it is also the giant bubble in the far right of the room giving off a bright mint-green glow.

This room also bore the scars of magical warfare. However the most notable thing in the room is the figure on the throne.

The figure is an older man, much of his body marred with glowing green crystals sprouting from him. He looks like he is partially encased on the throne by those crystals.

The Rot King, Maria realizes, looks so much more pathetic than she had imagined.

“Basil.”

The Rot King sounds more resigned than surprised.

“Uncle,” Basil says, “Uncle, don't you think that this is enough for father?”

The Rot King sighs, “Of course it is.”

Maria starts to slowly creep towards the bubble with Shael.

Basil starts to respond, but the King cuts them off, “Its not about him anymore, its about me.”

“What could you possibly want with this then? What are you gaining here?” Basil asks, voice rough.

“It is far too late for me to be anything else but what I am, and I am simply giving the world its just desserts,” Replies the King grimly.

Maria now felt well and truly pissed off, what a self-fulfilling prophesy of terrible jerk behavior this guy was!

She keeps moving towards the bubble even if she really wants to tell him where he could shove is 'just desserts'.

Basil crosses their arms, “Do you really think the innocent people on the countryside who had nothing to do with all of this

deserve to have their crops destroyed and to be hunted by unkillable monsters?”

The King shakes his head like a disappointed parent, “Humans and elves are never innocent. We are all already tainted. It is in our nature to do evil, so we do not deserve this world. I've said this before, Basil. You know this.”

Maria is now approximately sixty paces from the bubble. Just a little more then this misanthropic jerk wouldn't be their problem anymore.

Basil sighs, “I was just hoping you had changed your mind. So that's it then?”

The Rot King sighs and puts a hand out. A staff then flies out from the ceiling and into his hand. It has the same ragged green crystal on it that covered him, “That it is. But really Basil? Don't you want to introduce your friends?”

He taps his staff against the floor and a rippling field sweeps through the room, causing the illusion around Maria and Shael to fall.

Shael snaps into a ready position and unsheathes her short swords.

The Rot King inhales slowly, and then suddenly rippling appendages of that not-substance that the Taint are made from erupt from his body, “I'm afraid I will have to show you why I am right.”

Basil conjures a flickering golden shield to deflect an appendage at sweeps at them, before calling out, “Uncle! What have you made yourself!”

They dodge another swipe, and Shael deflects a second strike at her and Maria with her swords.

The Rot King gestures with his real hands, “Don't you see now? Its too late for me. I have embraced what it is people really are- I am what the world made me, and I will be its undoing.”

Basil twirls their staff and sends several fireballs ricocheting

around. The King merely blocks them with the Taint, sparks dissipating on contact.

“Come now,” The King says in response, “You can do better than that.”

A snaking bit of Taint that was sort of an arm and sort of a tentacle slams down at Maria, forcing her to jump back.

Shael comes forward to cover her, deflecting another swipe with her swords, before darting away again and shouting, “There is always a choice to make! You aren't embracing anything but your self-wallowing!”

Maria slinks forward to use the distraction while the King turned his attention briefly to Shael.

“On the contrary,” he says, “I have become enlightened! Really, shouldn't you be more polite with the family of your friend? That's bad manners. This just furthers my point!”

Then the King turns to Maria, now quite close to the bubble, and narrows his eyes, “Ah- Can't have that.”

All at once, several tentacle-arms rocket towards her, so she unsheathes her dagger for defense and makes a run for the bubble.

She is so close, a few steps more-

She gets her dagger up in time to block skin contact, but the appendage with a not-hand still forces her to the ground. Trapped.

To the side, Shael is likewise pinned.

Shael says something that was presumably very rude in elven. Maria never did get Shael to teach her cuss words. Shame.

“Again,” He says, “Such rudeness. The two of you are a bit too much of a problem to be allowed to run about. Now we can talk properly, like you wanted.”

Basil grips their staff, face set, “I'm listening.”

“Excellent,” The King says, “You want to know why I do this, all of you? How I am what I am?”

The King gestures, clearly getting into the monologuing spirit, “Long ago, when my brother was killed I discovered something that fateful day. See, before I brought the Taint fully into this world, it was still here- but it was weaker, more confined. Magic that pain was poured into would mutate and become partially autonomous. That is Taint. It is why the magic schools and towers insist one should never cast with negative emotions as the fuel behind it. It is not just that the backlash of a disrupted spell can kill, no, it is that if you are too good- or too unlucky, Taint will form. That requires unicorns.”

Maria grits her teeth and stares at the bubble as the man talks, so close.

If she could just-

The King continues, “When my brother died, I casted an augmentation spell entirely from my anger and grief- instead of elation. It worked- it made me stronger and faster, but Taint clung to me forevermore after. I realized that the Taint gave me power. That I could cast from it. Wizardry accesses the True Plane where our spirits reside and where the gods walk. Wizardry is accessing the true nature of the world and people, and if my Taint is so much stronger than my usual magics, and its so unkillable in general, then this must be the real true nature of people- the desire to hurt and do evil.”

He gestures again, really getting into his monologue, “The Taint is then just an expression of what people are truly like! So I took my revenge for my brother, showed them a mirror of their own evil. All people do is poison the land and kill each other, so I am wiping them out with the hurt they have wrought upon the world made manifest. Poetic, isn't it?”

Basil who had been looking down this whole time replies, “No.”

The King was clearly caught off guard, “What?”

Basil looks at their hands for a moment before taking a steeling breath and continuing, “Its not. Its not poetic, its selfish, narrow

mindful, and wrong!”

“People are not inherently anything,” Basil continues as they pick up steam, “Why is it then, if the true nature of people is to hurt others, that most magic is protective or helpful in nature? Almost half of the recognized uses of magic are wards used to aid people!”

Basil starts to smile, “The Taint is hurt made manifest, but do you know what defeats the emotion of hurt in people?”

Basil's hands start to glow with a warm golden light.

A spark of comprehension and alarm starts to gleam in the King's eyes, but it's too late, Basil reaches out and grabs a tentacle. All at once all the other bits of Taint seize and flicker and the King screams.

Maria sees her chance and darts forward to the bubble, hand outstretched.

Several things happen at once.

Basil collapses to their knees, Shael runs to cover Basil, The Taint appendages of the King stop flickering and seizing-

And Maria touches the bubble.

When her fingers touch it, the surface ripples, and then light flashes outwards in a blinding rush.

When Maria finishes blinking the flash out of her eyes, a pool is revealed in the floor.

There is a moment of stillness, then unicorns start pouring out of the pool, most run out the door, but a few raise their glowing horns and the Taint in the room starts to shrink and knit itself closed.

Hundreds -possibly thousands- pour out of it in a blur before finally there is a pause and a translucent





figure of Qrosoi appears.

She laughs, and holds out a hand.

Maria takes it.

The flash happens again, and like before, she shifts. This time, for good.

“Thank you,” Qrosoi says, “Isn't that much better now?”

'Thank you', Maria presses out mentally, coating it in as much gratitude as she can.

This is exactly what she wanted.

Qrosoi was quite strange, but she gave her the body she wanted, and that meant everything. This was a god she was willing to follow, she supposed. She could do worse.

Qrosoi smiles and fades away.

Her moment done, she redirects her attention to the King.

He is sunk back in his chair, the Taint and crystals that were growing out of and encasing his body gone. He looks even more sad and pathetic than before, as tears stream down his face.

Basil gets up with effort, and walks to him.

“Uncle.”

The King responds, it clearly taking effort, “I suppose this is the part where you win.”

Basil's expression becomes pinched, “Uncle...”

“I'm dying, Basil, without the Taint to sustain me. I suppose its fitting. I see now. I have felt the truth in your words and magic and that of the unicorns.”

Basil clenches their fists and grits their teeth as the King continues, “I am a wretched thing, do not miss me. It is better off this way, without the Taint I am nothing-”

Maria walks over and starts to try to heal him. Even if hes a

rude idiot, dying is the coward's way out, and Maria is far too petty to let him skip away with a tragic reconciliation farewell.

The King makes a soft noise of surprise, “You would try to even heal an enemy as vile as me?”

“Oh shut up!” Shael bursts out, drawing surprise from everyone, “Stop wallowing in your own self-pity and do something about how terrible you are then!”

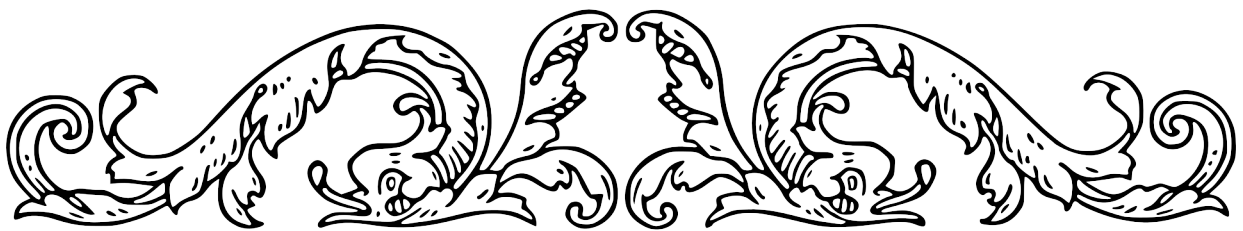
Maria is more focused on her healing and fueling it with 'desire to make someone well' instead of 'punish the idiot', but she pays some attention to the conversation. Its tougher to heal a person than the Taint, she finds.

Shael storms over, patience well and truly snapped after the events of the last day, “Maria has seen fit to give you a second chance, use it. Don't just wallow! You know better now? Do something about it! You can't make up for anything if you're dead!”

Basil reaches out a hand, “Break the cycle, Uncle. It won't erase what you did, but you can make up for some of the damage. If not for yourself, then for me.”

The King quirks a small smile as Maria steps away- healing done as well as she could, “I suppose I could try.”

He takes Basil's hand.



Some time later, it is time to start heading home. Basil elects to stay with their uncle to help put things to rights, stating that there was still a lot of work to be done yet.

On the day Shael and Maria decide to head back, Maria asks Basil how they did what they did.

“You said that you were healing Taint, not killing it,” Basil

says, "That wasn't something in the books anyone kept in the tower I trained at, that wasn't something I'd heard anyone say about the subject. And believe me- I looked for everything about getting rid of the Taint. It got me thinking."

Basil continues, "Humans and elves are not good at healing magics, its why unicorns are so special. Minor spells can be done, but its quite hard, and casting must be done with the right intent for us to a much higher degree than regular wizardry to avoid backlash. Taint is such a scary, horrible thing, I figured, that its unlikely anyone tried to heal it before when its such a difficult spell to cast. It was worth a shot."

Running their hands through their hair, they finish their explanation, "So I gambled and it paid off. It didn't work all the way like a unicorn might, but it was enough."

Maria butts her head against them, 'It was brilliant. Pulled a miracle out of your robes there.'

Basil huffs something that could have been a laugh, "I suppose so! You did the most important bit though."

Maria whickers.

"No really," They said, "I cannot thank you enough for all of this. You saved the world and my uncle, I suppose. You are, if I might be presumptuous, one of my most treasured friends."

'You are a good friend too, so you better write!'

Basil nods, "Of course!"

Now Maria only had to worry about what to say to her parents about her new appearance and exactly where she was all this time.

Drat.





# POSTFACE

Another year's past, and I'm left at the end of the second issue of Inky Paws with not much to say. This anthology, out of every other project I've had my claws in, has left me the most breathless when I've reached its summit. It's an awe-inspiring reminder of what our community is capable of, of the stories and wonders lying inside of us all. It's more humbling than I could ever hope to express in the space of a single page.

I hope that when you thumb through these writings that have been bravely shared by your peers, you can feel the heady weight of inspiration running just under the surface. I hope that it comes easily if you choose to grapple it. And I hope that, should you follow that enjoyable path, you delight just as much in the act of creation as you do in the act of sharing it with the rest of us. May you not be caught up in the briar-patches of self-doubt and imposter syndrome, and may the warm sun shine on all your paths with discovery and success.

Once again, I beseech you: never stop leaving tracks and trails. It's proof of a life well-lived and well-loved. No one can choose to leave those tracks for you— you have to venture out yourself. So go! What are you waiting for? We're all cheering you on.

Yours in kin and claw,

Page Shepard